

SIMPSON

By PHILIP LATHAM



RAWLINS found Linda in the transmitting room giving some last-minute instructions to the chief engineer. Considering that they were discussing the details of an invasion that might change the course of events within the solar system, they appeared remarkably calm.

"I think we'll drop the artificial flowers first," Linda said

studying the schedule in her hand. "They should have a reassuring effect, don't you think? Let the Venusians know we're nice people."

"Drop artificial flowers first," the engineer repeated, writing it down.

"Next will come the vitamin candy bars. Now, we don't have so very many of them, so be sure

and wait till we're over the city before you start strewing them around."

"You know, those candy bars worry me," the engineer said. "If one of them ever hits a Venusian it will knock him cold sure."

Linda's smile might have been meant for a five-year-old child. "Mr. Simpson has taken care to have each candy bar equipped with its own individual parachute. That's the reason we have so few of them."

"I just wondered," the engineer returned.

"Then after the candy bars we'll start dropping the photographs of Simpson himself. The one with the big smile and both hands outstretched."

"Okay," the engineer told her. He closed his notebook with a snap. "How soon do we roll?"

"That will depend upon Mr. Simpson. Right after the broadcast probably."

"Incidentally, where is the chief?" Rawlins inquired. "I haven't seen him for the last hour."

Linda consulted her wrist-watch. "Right now Mr. Simpson is taking his Swedish exercises. In another five minutes he will be getting his rubdown. In another ten minutes—"

"Good lord! Doesn't he ever pass up that routine of his? Even when there's an invasion on?"

"Success is attained through the persistent application of right habits of thought and living. A sound mind in a sound body, for instance."

"Oh, yeah?"

Rawlins knew it wasn't good, but it was the best he could do at the moment. He sauntered over to the window, where he stood staring down at the pale lemon tinted disk of Venus.

"Well, buzz me when you're ready," the engineer said. "I'll be down in the astrolab counting the minutes."

Silence descended upon the transmitting room. Linda continued checking her schedule. Rawlins maintained his moody contemplation of Venus. The planet was growing larger with uncomfortable rapidity. They were so close now that the billowy character of the cloud layer was clearly evident above the saffron level beneath. The white tufts reminded him of the whipped cream on his mother's pineapple layer cake. His stomach ulcers twinged feebly.

"Of all the crazy ideas I ever fell for, this is the worst," he muttered. "Shipping on an invasion of Venus as a public opinion expert."

"What's so crazy about that?" Linda remarked, deftly clipping two pages together. "How can we expect to govern this planet

efficiently unless we know what its inhabitants are thinking about?"

Rawlins regarded her with distinct distaste. It irked him that any girl as pretty and feminine as Linda King should be so utterly absorbed in the affairs of J. Danforth Simpson. What she needed was waking up. A female robot with green eyes and chestnut hair.

"But a people like the Venusians," he said. "From what I hear they're still practically in the figleaf stage. To say nothing of being mostly women."

"Is that bad? The part about being women, I mean?"

"Well, it's not exactly good when it comes to sampling. The trouble with women is they aren't satisfied with just answering your questions. They want to pour out their whole life story besides."

Linda sniffed. "If you're going to work for Mr. Simpson then I suggest you get busy devising a suitable polling technique for feminine interviews. For that will undoubtedly be your first assignment—getting a line on the women."

Further discussion was interrupted by the appearance of J. Danforth Simpson himself. The instant you set eyes on him you knew that here was the Man You Had Been Waiting to See.

The One in Control. The Person with Authority to Act. You could tell by the purposeful way he walked. In the firmly compressed set of his mouth. By the searching look in his pale blue eyes. Above all it was evidenced by the handkerchief in his breast coat pocket. Obviously it was the major executive type of handkerchief. Those three linen points standing crisply at attention could never have belonged to anyone less than the second vice-president at the very least. They were Simpson's badge and seal, his official sign of rank. They carried all the authority of the gold stars on a general's shoulder.

"And how is the invasion coming?" Simpson asked, giving Rawlins a cordial nod and beaming upon his secretary. "Everything on schedule, I trust?"

"We're ready for the broadcast anytime," Linda said.

"Good. Then shall we proceed at once?"

"Maybe you'd better look over this script first. I had to make a few changes since we discussed it last time."

Simpson ran his eye down the typewritten pages, taking in sentences in great gulps, like an editor.

"Hmm. Why don't we omit most of this introduction? The basic situation should be suf-

ficiently clear without any preliminary buildup." He handed the pages back with a quick smile. "Condense. Digest. Simplify. Let those be our watchwords. And now if you will summon the radio crew please."

Rawlins could not but admire the smooth efficiency with which Simpson's staff began preparations for the broadcast. Despite their attitude of outward calm he knew the situation was a tense one for all concerned. There was Stracker, the space surgeon, cool and detached, with that perpetual expression of polite inquiry in his eyes that marks the professional medical man; Doyle Wentworth, the organic chemist, obviously controlling his nervousness by an effort; Hansen, the geophysicist, and a dozen others. Men who could easily have made a name for themselves in their particular fields if they had not preferred anonymity with Simpson.

The chief stood alone by the window gazing out upon the turbulent cloud expanse that was Venus. What thoughts were coursing through the brain cavity under that pink expanse of skull? Rawlins wondered. Never before had any one man achieved such complete mastery over so many individuals as J. Danforth Simpson. In all Earth there was no apparent threat to his domina-

tion. One of the principal reasons Rawlins had accepted the unexpected invitation to join the expedition was that it gave him an opportunity to study the man at close range. Previously he had been nothing more than a vast shadowy personality behind a powerful chain of newspapers and magazines; a name in small letters flashed on the screen at the end of a television or motion picture show; a mind functioning at the center of an intricate network of controls extending to the farthest reaches of the globe.

It had come as a considerable shock, therefore, to discover that while Simpson certainly possessed some unusual qualities he was by no means the master mind that he appeared from a distance. In fact, Rawlins had not been associated with his new chief many days before he began to suspicion that in certain respects the man was plain dumb, or at least greatly over-estimated. But whereas most men spend their lives struggling ineffectively without getting anywhere Simpson by some strange alchemy kept on succeeding and succeeding. Only you felt that it was always just an accident. With the same opportunities you could have done the same yourself.

Linda was speaking into the transmitter in low, honeyed tones,

quite different from her usual crisp style.

"This is Linda King speaking to you from the transmitting room of the *Albireo*. At this moment we are revolving over Venus about a thousand miles above that planet's cloud-covered surface. As you all know, this is the crucial point in our long journey across space. Promptly at the close of this broadcast the invasion of Venus will begin. What the outcome of that venture will be no one knows, least of all ourselves. When you hear from us again—if you do hear from us again—we will be broadcasting from the surface of the planet itself.

"We know how impatiently you must be waiting news of an invasion that we hope will open up a new world of untold wealth for colonization and development. Probably you are wondering how it feels to be standing poised upon the brink of onslaught at such a moment in history. And so I am going to ask the man to tell you who conceived and put into execution this great project—J. Danforth Simpson."

Simpson stepped solemnly to the transmitter.

"Dear friends," he began, speaking in a voice tense with emotion, "all I can say at this time is that I feel very humble.

Upon our shoulders rests the responsibility of bringing the fruits of our civilization and culture to a primitive people. But let me emphasize that we come to these people—not as arrogant conquerors—but as friends with hearts overflowing with goodwill and tenderness. We come not as self-seeking spoilers but as kindly neighbors eager to share the flower of our fruits and arts, so that what has taken us centuries of toil to achieve may be made available to others in an instant of time."

"Mr. Simpson, will you tell us how you plan to proceed about this invasion?"

"I shall proceed as if it were impossible to fail," Simpson replied promptly. "Indeed from the very start there has never been a moment when I had the slightest misgiving. In my own mind it is already done."

"What will be your first act upon landing?"

"Well, I think my first act will be to establish cordial relations with the Venusian people. As you know, Venus is a world closely similar to our own. From what information we have been able to secure from preliminary scouting expeditions there is every reason for believing that Venus and its inhabitants are essentially identical with our own world, except that there appears

to be a gap of a few thousand years in time. But this is a gulf easily spanned. In a year I predict that they will be as one with us."

"Does Venus at present possess any form of government that might oppose our mission?"

"Well, none worth mentioning. Oh, there is a ruler of sorts who appears to exercise mild authority over the planet's few million inhabitants. Curiously enough this ruler is a woman. An interesting coincidence when we recall that Venus is named after the goddess of love."

"I'm sure the feminine members of our audience will be anxious to hear more of this woman ruler," Linda murmured, a hint of laughter behind her voice. "How she looks and what she wears. And how she takes the invasion of her domain."

"We don't anticipate any difficulty on that score," Simpson said. "Considering the fact that she has nothing whatever with which to oppose us."

"Then this woman is quite powerless, you think?"

"Oh, quite. But naturally, the thought of force is highly reprehensible to us. As I stand here, with the invasion now only minutes away, I feel that our strongest weapon is the nobility of our purpose. The fact that we come actuated only by the

highest ideals. The loftiest motives. Truly we can say with the poet, 'Our strength is as the strength of ten because our heart is pure.' "

"I'm sure that expresses the feelings of us all, Mr. Simpson," Linda assured him warmly. "It will be a thought for us to cherish during the dark hours ahead."

She nodded to the engineer.

"And now, friends, the time has come when we must abandon the comparative comfort of our deep-space machine for the cramped confines of the high-thrust ferry rockets that will convey us to the surface of Venus.

"And so, good-bye, till you hear from us again. The invasion is on!"

II

RAWLINS struggled up through the blanket of unconsciousness that covered him fathoms deep. A moment more and he would reach the surface. There! He sat up and opened his eyes. He felt rotten. He decided that landing on a planet in one of these invasion tubs was like falling off a stepladder when you had a bad hangover.

Several times he tried to rise but each time he found his leg apparently caught under some heavy cylindrical object. A piece

of gaspipe sticking through the floor, probably. He gave his leg a vigorous jerk. The object was evidently more complicated than he had at first supposed, with several knobs and branches projecting from it.

"If you'll stop kicking me for a minute I'll try to move over so you can get your foot loose."

It was Linda's voice coming, as it seemed, from a great distance. He remained obediently quiet while she went through some sort of contortional act. The next thing he knew she was sitting up beside him rubbing her nose.

"You had your foot right in my face," she said reproachfully.

"Sorry," Rawlins apologized. "You'll have to chalk it up to inexperience. My first invasion, you know."

Linda continued to investigate her various features. Presently she shook her head as if to clear away the cobwebs, and glanced around the narrow interior of the cabin.

"I wonder where Dr. Stracker is?"

"I think I can hear him stirring up front now."

"Let's go see," she said, getting to her knees.

They worked their way along the side of the ship to the section where the controls were housed. Dr. Stracker was lying on his stomach peering through the for-

ward window. Rawlins crawled up beside him.

"How's the scenery outside?" he asked.

"Take a look," Stracker said, rolling away from the window.

Rawlins flattened his nose against the glass. By looking up at a sharp angle through the narrow aperture he was able to discern a dozen men and women gazing down at them from the rim of the crater formed by the impact of the rocket.

"Curious looking creatures, aren't they?" Stracker said. "Judging from their garb, they're still in the early pastoral stage."

"Judging from their whiskers they certainly haven't reached the safety razor stage," Rawlins said.

"The women look as if they had just stepped out of an operetta," Linda exclaimed, "with those flowing white costumes and the flowers in their hair. You know—the merry villagers who come dancing in at the end of the act."

For several minutes they lay staring up at the Venusians who stared back with equal solemnity.

"Now I think I know how those Martians felt in the *War of the Worlds*," Rawlins grunted. "I'll bet they were just as upset as the people outside gawking at them."

"I wonder if we shouldn't be thinking about getting out of

here," Stracker remarked, working one leg cautiously back and forth.

"The plan was to leave the rockets and contact Simpson as soon as possible," Linda said. "Then when we were all assembled and if there were no mishaps we were to march on the palace immedately."

"The palace?" Rawlins echoed. "You mean they've got a palace around here someplace?"

"Well, the place where the queen lives anyhow."

"Then suppose we start making preparations for leaving," Stracker said. "I'll see if I can find the rifles and ammunition."

"Wonder if we'll need 'em?" Rawlins said, peering out at the Venusians again. "They don't look very belligerent to me."

"Simpson said expressly to come out fully armed," Linda stated firmly. "I don't think we have any business deviating from his instructions."

They emerged from the ship a few minutes later and clambered up the side of the crater taking care to keep their rifles trained on the crowd at all times. The Venusians backed away from them without displaying any particular signs either of animosity or alarm. Rawlins found their silent appraising scrutiny harder to bear than if they had been openly hostile. They made him

feel as nervous as a new boy at school who knows that some of the kids are laying for him afterward.

The three gained the top of the bank where they stood huddled together taking stock of their surroundings. The air was hot and dry with the burning penetrating heat of the desert. A low stunted type of vegetation resembling ice plant reddish green in color with coarse fleshy creepers sprawled over the desert like a ragged carpet. Behind the thick cirrus haze that mantled the sky, the sun was a blurred yellow smear. The wind drifting over the sand dunes carried a faint acrid odor like that of scorching metal. Far away against the horizon three enormous crater cones smoldered black and forbidding.

Rawlins gave the doctor a nudge. "Why don't you ask them something? My Venusian's not so good."

"Mine neither," Stracker replied. He turned to Linda. "I believe you're the best qualified to hold speech with these people. Maybe we ought to introduce ourselves."

Linda hesitated. Apparently even she was flustered a bit by the Venusians' silent stare. Presently she addressed the man nearest her, a tall gaunt individual with long white waterfall whiskers.

"We have come a great distance from another world," she said, waving her hand overhead. "We come to you as friends. We do not wish to harm you. We hope our rockets did not injure you when they fell from the sky."*

The man did not reply but examined Linda with his solemn owlsh eyes, his gaze shifting back and forth between her face and wrinkled coverall suit. Then, before anyone could intervene, he stepped forward and ran his fingers over her face and through her hair as if he were sampling some piece of merchandise.

"Well, of all the nerve!" Linda gasped.

"Say, what's the idea?" Rawlins demanded, advancing a step.

"Watch it," Stracker cautioned, holding him back.

The Venusian pointed an accusing finger at Linda.

"We guessed you came from another world," he said. "We thought you would only be men. We did not expect to find a woman among you."

"Why did you not expect to find a woman among us?" Linda asked.

"Our women do not accompany men on long journeys. Women should remain at home to gather fruit and berries and to care for the children."

"You mean the women have to do all the work around here?"

The Venusian shrugged indifferently. "There are always plenty of women to do the work."

Rawlins noticed that several of the Venusian men grinned and nudged one another as if they found the old man's remarks amusing. Although powerfully built, rough-looking fellows, they seemed good-natured enough.

"Remember these people are several thousand years behind us," Rawlins told Linda. "They never heard of woman's rights."

"Then why have they got a queen for a ruler?"

"It's not so unusual. Several women in times past have ruled great countries and done a fairly good job of it, too. There was Queen Elizabeth, for instance, and Catherine the Great and Maria Theresa of Austria. Although they ruled as absolute monarchs, the position of women did not improve during their reigns. The men still managed to keep their wives pretty well under their thumbs."

"Yes, I'd go slow here," Stracker suggested. "Some tradi-

*All members of the expedition had received instruction in Venusian speech and manners from two natives captured on an early reconnoitering trip.

THE BEAUTIFUL MONSTERS

There is a widespread theory, occurring in most science-fiction, that we'd like to see, lot less often. It is assumed that because a being comes from another world, or an unexplored segment of our own world, that he must be horrible to view.

The fact is that the unknown can be a lot more pleasant than the known world. Philip Latham, in this month's *Simpson*, makes that point in his discussion about his *Venerian Queen Hortense*. Larry M. Harris' *Expatriate*, in our last issue, accepted the point as a working theory.

In general, however, the trend continues—toward more and more horrible monstrosities, more and more blood-chilling misdeformations. Once in a while, as in the examples pointed out, a story refuses to accept the trend—and that story usually is a fine one, because the author has entirely new material with which to work.

A cry will, of course, go up: "But if your other-world creatures are so handsome and intelligent—what's there to fight against?"

Well, we Earthmen aren't all hideous looking; yet we find enough dissension down here. It is, admittedly, extremely difficult to create not only a consistent but a believable alien mentality and personality. Instead of doing so, therefore, many writers are content to label the alien "horrible," and forget about characterization. When fully characterized, as in the examples mentioned above, the alien becomes *not horrible* but understandable, perhaps a likeable individual, with problems of his own.

The alien and the Earthmen still can be opposed, of course—in philosophy, for example, but in order for that friction to be understood and transmitted to the reader, both viewpoints have to be understandable.

The monstrous being, the consistently raving beast, is a non-survival creature. Sooner or later, such creatures will wipe themselves out, due to an excess of brutality and a lack of other talents.

Chances are, when we do reach other worlds, that we'll find very few such beings. Most of the things we find undoubtedly will be strange, and some of them may be *horrible* by our standards. On the other hand, some may be so supernaturally beautiful that we can't stand to look at them.

Let's leave our neighbors—including the neighbors five or forty or a thousand light-years away.

—The Editors

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tion is doubtless involved that we don't understand as yet."

"Well, if you ask me, I think they're in a rut," said Linda.

It gave Rawlins a certain perverse pleasure to see her discomfiture.

"Take it easy, honey," he grinned. "I think the old boy's got something maybe."

Before Linda could retort they were interrupted by the sound of voices growing louder behind some sand dunes. In a few minutes Simpson came into view over the hillcock followed by his staff and a crowd of perhaps a hundred Venusians. A score of children in various degrees of nudity ran laughing and shouting before them.

Simpson hailed them with a wave of his arm.

"Things couldn't be better," he puffed. "Think of it—not a single person killed or even seriously injured. Shows you what careful planning will do."

He stood with his hands on his hips gazing around him triumphantly. His face was flushed from the exertion and the vein in his right temple throbbed visibly.

"What a country," he cried. "Never dreamed it would be this good. There's a beautiful green valley right below us. A regular treasure house of nature. And

to think we've got the first crack at it."

"How about the natives?" Rawlins remarked. "Maybe they won't see it that way."

"Don't think so," Simpson replied, gaining confidence as he got his wind back. "They strike me as extraordinarily cooperative, from what I've seen of them. We can get an index on their opinions and attitudes later. Leave all that paper work up to you. Right now I want to set up headquarters and consolidate our position. Do first things first. That's my motto."

He motioned to an officer in the intelligence corps.

"What's our position, Baker?"

"Not more than two hours hike to the capital city, I should say. The navigator did a swell job of bringing us in."

"This the city where the queen lives?"

"That's right."

"What have we got on her, anyway?"

The officer consulted his notes. "Well, not much, to tell the truth. Name's Hortense near as we can pronounce it. Seems to have been running things here as far back as anybody can remember. Pretty well liked apparently. That about sums it up."

"Hmm," Simpson grunted. "Old dame, probably. Senile monarch surrounded by few

faithful servitors. Putters around the palace while the royal chamberlain pulls the strings. Might get opposition there. Got to be on guard. Watch everything. That's our motto."

He seized a whistle dangling from a cord around his neck and blew a blast that made the Venusians jump.

"We're marching on the palace," he announced. "Going to see Queen Hortense, the ruler of this planet, and inform her of the plans we intend to put into effect for the benefit of her loyal subjects."

He smiled benevolently on the Venusians clustered around him.

"Perhaps some of our friends here might be able to show us the way. Hey, Mac, how about you?" he called, pointing to a Venusian lad whose face showed a glimmering of intelligence above the rest. "Want to make a fast buck?"

The boy grinned and bobbed his head.

"Good. Then lead on, Mac-Duff. You take care of us and we'll take care of you."

They made a strange procession troup ing over the desert, the Earthmen in their somber garments with their snub-nosed rifles crooked under their arms, followed by the flower-decked Venusians, like actors in a modern drama who had strayed

onto a set depicting a grove in Arcady.

After tramping over the desert for half an hour their guide led them to a highway bordered by flowering plants intermingled with a thick growth of dark decumbent vine. Occasionally the jungle was broken by a mud hut with a garden in front and some smaller buildings in the rear. These houses rose from the ground in smooth flowing lines as naturally as the shrubs around them.* Although crude structures, they were not without a certain charm. Each dwelling was in some way distinguished from its neighbors, by the curving line of the doorway, the configuration of the windows, or the manner in which a vine had been trained to conceal some detail of construction.

News of the invasion had evidently gone before them, for the travellers often found whole families lined up along the road awaiting their arrival. As already mentioned, the men, with their fierce whiskers and brawny arms and shoulders, had a fearsome appearance although their eyes seemed kind and friendly. The women, on the whole, were rather disappointing. Some of the

*Later they discovered that the dwellings were streamlined as a protection against the wind, which often attained velocities exceeding a hundred miles an hour.

younger ones were quite attractive but few would have qualified as first-rate glamor girls. The main trouble seemed to be that they made so little use of what natural charms they had. Aside from the flowers they made no attempt at adornment whatever. Their white gowns hung around their bodies as awkwardly as maternity dresses. Their hair hung in lank strands about their face or was done up in a coarse knot behind. No powder dimmed the sheen of their noses or cheeks. Like the women in tropical countries of the Earth they gave signs of aging early. At thirty they might have been fifty; at fifty they were wrinkled crones, their faces stiffened into a gray mask by the pitiless Venusian sun.

"Well, at least nobody's thrown any tomatoes or dead cats at us yet," Rawlins observed, as they entered the outskirts of the city.

"Haven't noticed them strewing any roses in our path either," Stracker replied. "These people give me a peculiar feeling. As if I were a patient in a clinic stripped down for examination."

Rawlins chuckled. "I know what you mean. But I guess we'd take a good hard look at any invaders who landed on the Earth, too."

Just when the crowd was

getting so thick they had trouble forcing their way down the street, their guide led them into a broad square facing a stone building that was evidently the palace. There was an altar on each side of the entrance, one burning with a low flame, the other piled high with combustibles as if for kindling. The crowd had overflowed into the square and spread out along the far end opposite the palace.

The palace was by far the largest building the travellers had seen on Venus although judged by terrestrial standards it would hardly have made a fair-sized county court house. Like all Venusian buildings it was constructed along streamlines that gave it a strangely modern appearance. The stones were old and worn and in protected places splotched by some greenish fungus growth. Long narrow windows stared out from the walls like cat's eyes. A narrow balcony ran along the upper story overlooking the square.

Their Venusian guide waved his hand toward the palace and did a quick fadeout into the crowd, leaving the Earthmen stranded in the middle of the square.

"Can't say I like the looks of this," the intelligence officer muttered. "These people are too expectant. As if this was a Roman

holiday and we were the chief attraction on the program."

"Now I think you're misjudging these folks," Simpson said. "They seem pretty nice to me. Anyhow, we can't stand out here forever chewing it over. We've got to keep moving. Keep advancing. All the time."

Simpson suited the action to the word by advancing confidently toward the open door of the palace. He had taken barely a dozen steps when a group of men erupted through the door and hurled themselves upon the invaders. Simpson went down like a shot. A wild melee ensued as his men sprang to his side. The square rang with the crackle and whine of bullets and the grunt and surge of bodies.

A man bore down on Rawlins, big, bony, and powerful. He swung his fist at Rawlins head in a wide sweeping arc. Rawlins watched the blow coming. He knew it would hurt him unless he got out of the way but for some reason he seemed powerless to move. The blow landed with a force that jarred him to his heels. Rawlins raised his rifle to fire then hesitated. The man was unarmed. His only weapons were his bare hands.

The man came lunging at him again. Rawlins swung his rifle blindly, felt it land with a satisfying crunch. The man grabbed at

Rawlins' legs as he went down. He clawed at him desperately trying to rise. Rawlins struck him again with his rifle. The man slumped to the ground and lay still.

The struggle ended as quickly as it had begun. Suddenly the Earthmen found themselves standing in the center of the square, bloody and dishevelled, victorious if not exactly triumphant. Their attackers lay dead around them or sat on their haunches with their heads buried in their arms. One man with blood trickling from his mouth was being very sick at his stomach.

Rawlins picked his way over to the palace door where Linda was standing, looking pale and shaken but otherwise uninjured.

"Sure a nice welcome they gave us," he said, managing a feeble grin. "I was afraid we were done for there for a minute."

"So did I," she whispered, trying to smile back. Suddenly she was all solicitude. "Oh, you've got a bad cut. Hold still while I see if I can stop it bleeding."

He held still while Linda applied her handkerchief to the wound.

"There. That will have to do till Dr. Stracker can see you."

She examined him anxiously.
"Are you all right?"

"Yeah, sure. I really didn't do much of anything."

"Neither did I. I'm afraid I wasn't any help at all. I just kept over here on the sidelines."

"Well, you'd certainly have been foolish to get mixed up in a scrap like that."

"But it was all so insane," Linda cried. "Those men rushing out and attacking us that way with their bare hands. Whatever do you suppose possessed them?"

"Must have been some kind of suicide squad, I guess."

"They don't look like these other Venusian men, do they?" she said, studying the battered forms of their assailants. They're clean-shaven and so much finer-featured."

"Maybe they're specially selected that way for the palace guard," Rawlins suggested. "Like the Potsdam giants that Frederick the First used to have."

"I wonder."

Something in Linda's tone struck him as peculiar.

"What do you mean?" he asked.

"Look up there."

He followed her gaze. A woman was bending over the balcony contemplating them with her chin cupped in the palms of her hands. The sight of her took Rawlins breath away. She was

unquestionably the most beautiful thing he had ever seen. He had to blink twice to make sure he wasn't dreaming. Good lord, what loveliness! Raven black hair falling in clusters about her bare white shoulders. Pale delicate features. Eyes as dark and serene as a mountain pool at evening. The Blessed Damozel. A goddess come to life.

The woman's gaze roved casually over the figures in the square lingering for a brief moment on this one or that before passing on to another. Under her calm scrutiny Rawlins felt awkward and ashamed. He wanted to tell her that he really wasn't as bad as he looked. That he wasn't the kind of a person who went around getting mixed up in brawls in front of other people's palaces.

For one pulsating moment he felt those dark eyes appraising him. Then, with the barest hint of a smile on her lips, the woman disappeared behind the balustrade.

III

GRADUALLY Rawlins re-turned to the land of the living. He grinned at Linda. "Guess that must have been the queen."

"Yes, Pretty, isn't she?"
"Not bad."

There was a brief silence.

"Maybe we should go over and see how Simpson is getting along," Linda said.

They found the chief propped up against one of the altars looking slightly dazed.

"Thank goodness you're safe, Linda," he sighed. "I'd be lost without you."

He got unsteadily to his feet and walked over to where the prisoners sat huddled together.

"What was the big idea? Assaulding us that way?"

Nobody answered. The men sat staring sullenly ahead of them with their eyes fixed on the ground.

"You in the blue shirt," Simpson growled, nodding to one of the men who from the distinctive character of his dress appeared to be the leader. "You the head of this outfit?"

"What's left of it," the man replied. He might have been rather handsome if his face had not been so lined and tired.

"That woman up there on the balcony a minute ago now. Was that Queen Hortense?"

The man nodded without raising his eyes.

"She the one sicked you on to us?"

"No, she didn't have anything to do with it," the man said, showing some animation for the first time. "When we heard you

were out here we lost our heads completely. Our only idea was to stop you. I guess it wasn't such a good idea."

Simpson stood for a moment scowling down at him.

"These guys look all bushed to me," he said to his intelligence officer. "I'm for going inside and seeing this Hortense."

"I think some of us should search the place first," the officer objected. "There might be some more of them hiding in there."

"We're all here," the leader muttered.

"You know where to find Queen Hortense?" Simpson asked him.

"Sure. You go through that door there, walk up the incline, and you'll find her out on the balcony. She isn't hard to find."

"Then suppose you get your bunch together and find her then."

The prisoners got reluctantly to their feet and shuffled toward the open palace door followed at a discreet distance by the Earthmen. The shadowy recesses of the palace were a welcome relief from the burning heat of the square. Instinctively the men dropped their voices and tread more gently as if they had entered a cathedral. But it was a cathedral in which pagan designs and erotic figures were displayed in place of the usual

religious symbols. The feminine influence was everywhere. One saw it in the dull gleam of the mirrors along the wall; in the soft shoulders of the tall vases overflowing with pink and purple blossoms; in the graceful folds of the draperies; and in the elaborate use of crystal for ornamentation. Over all there hung a sense of hushed repose that comes only from years of ordered living.

On the second level the man led them through an archway into a room with smooth sloping walls. The woman they had seen from the square lay half reclining on a low couch near the open balcony. She wore a simple costume similar to that of the other Venusian women, except that it was somewhat finer and whiter in texture. Several girls were gathered about the queen studying their visitors lazily like dozing cats. One stood behind the queen brushing her hair with long regular strokes, pausing occasionally to smooth out a lock with her fingers or to run her hand caressingly around the back of her neck.

The queen lay back regarding them languidly with the same air of detachment that she had viewed them from the balcony. Yet it was not upon the invaders but upon their prisoners that her glance rested.

"So this is the end," she murmured to the leader, a hint of reproach in her voice.

The man gestured helplessly, keeping his eyes averted.

"As I predicted," she said.

"As you predicted."

"You worked so long and struggled so hard. I really am almost sorry that it should have ended this way."

The queen gazed upon him with eyes that were very tender.

"And now you must go . . . as you promised me."

The man motioned to his companions who formed a half-circle behind him facing the queen. They stood for a moment in silence as if too overcome to speak. Then they turned and started to file slowly from the room. Some of Simpson's men attempted to bar the way but the queen waved them aside.

"Now what do you think of that?" Linda said, as the men's footsteps died away down the hall.

"Sounds like something out of the last act of the *Prisoner of Zenda*," Rawlins told her.

Simpson broke the spell with a theatrical cough.

"Can't tell you how much we regret this incident in the square," he rumbled. "We come here on a peaceful mission. Ambassadors of good will, so to speak."

"So I see," the queen said, glancing at the rifle resting in the crook of his arm.

"Well, naturally we didn't know what we might be up against here. We had to be ready for anything. Hope for the best and prepare for the worst. That's my motto."

The queen's eyes were almost severe. Then suddenly she relaxed and waved her hand at the cushions scattered over the floor.

"I think I understand perfectly. And now sit down. We can talk so much better when we're all comfortable."

She lay back contentedly as the men disposed themselves around the room arching her neck and quivering slightly under the regular stroke of the brush. Rawlins was sure that if he had been a trifle closer he could have heard her purr.

Simpson dragged a pillow alongside the couch and sat down uncertainly.

"Now I wouldn't blame you a bit for being good and sore at having a bunch of strangers come barging in on you like this," he began. "But when you hear the proposition I've got to offer I think you'll change your mind. You got a mighty fine place here, your majesty."

He broke off suddenly. "Say, what should I call you anyhow?"

The queen favored him with

what must have been one of her sweetest smiles. "Suppose you just call me Hortense."

"Thanks . . . er, Hortense. Since we've got business to talk over we might as well get acquainted right away. My name's Simpson—J. Danforth Simpson. 'J. D.' They sometimes call me, for short. This is my secretary, Linda King. And this young fellow here who keeps so close to her all the time is my personal advisor and public opinion expert, Steve Rawlins."

Linda and Rawlins said something about how happy they were to be there which the queen acknowledged with a graceful inclination of her head. Simpson hitched his pillow closer to the couch.

"As I was saying, you got a mighty fine place here, Hortense. Unlimited resources from all reports. Plenty of room for expansion. And a mighty fine bunch of people from what I've seen of 'em. But frankly, the place looks kind of run-down to me. Kind of sloppy and gone to seed. What I'd like to do is work your mineral deposits and cultivate the land to take care of the increase in population that's bound to come. With the right organization there isn't any limit to how far you could go here."

Queen Hortense selected a fruit resembling a pomegranate

from a basket by her side and began nibbling at it daintily, exploring the soft pulpy interior with the tip of her tongue.

"Now if you don't mind my saying so I doubt if you've got the know-how here on Venus to swing a deal of this size," Simpson continued, warming to his subject. "Understand, I don't doubt for a minute you're every bit as smart as us. Maybe even smarter. But you see we got quite a head start on you. It takes time to build up to the level we've reached. It takes lots and lots of time. So what I say is—why wait? When we're right here to hand you these things on a silver platter."

"Just what is it you wish to bring us?"

"Well, there's lots of things. Things I can't describe because you've never seen or heard of anything like 'em before. Things like motors and rockets and atomic energy. And houses with all the modern conveniences instead of these little shacks your people live in now. And rafts of other things that make life easier like the movies and television and flush toilets. You just give me a year or two and Venus will be so spick-and-span and so up-and-coming you won't know the place."

Hortense ran her tongue over her lips licking up the red juice

that had oozed from the pomegranate.

"Suppose I do not wish my world made over? Suppose I prefer to keep it just as it is at present?"

Simpson shifted his weight from one knee to the other.

"Well, Hortense, I'm laying all my cards on the table. It took a lot of work to organize this trip. Furthermore, I didn't come here entirely for the pleasure of making your acquaintance. Now that I'm here it looks even better than I expected. In other words, I'm here to stay."

"In other words you will put your ideas into execution whether it pleases me or not."

"Let's put it this way. I'm what they call a self-made man. If I do say it myself I think I've made a success out of my life. I've never failed in anything I set out to do and I don't intend to begin now."

Queen Hortense waved the pomegranate at the little group of men around her. "But how can you dictate to me? When there are so few of you and so many of us?"

Simpson's face was grim. "I warn you, don't try to resist us. I have resources and equipment at my disposal you know nothing about. Believe me, I am thinking of your best interest when I warn you—don't try to resist us."

Hortense sank back limply on her couch.

"It's true," she sighed. "My people are kind and peaceful and know nothing of the arts of war. We could not resist you even if we tried."

She twisted her body into a more comfortable position so that she lay facing Simpson directly. "We are quite helpless. You have us completely in your power. We are yours. Take us. Do with us what you will."

Simpson made a deprecating gesture.

"Well, now I wouldn't put it quite that way, Hortense. People don't make wars anymore. They went out years ago. Oh, of course, there's a little skirmish now and then but no real bloodshed, you understand. Cooperation's the watchword these days. Now confound it! When I said we came here to help you I meant every word of it. When you see the things I've got planned you'll be with me a hundred per cent."

"You are free to start any time, Mr. Simpson."

"Then I'll start right now!"

Before he could get to his feet Hortense caught him by the arm. "I have only one thing more to say."

"All right, go ahead and say it."

Hortense split one of the pomegranate seeds with her

teeth. "Your project will end in ruin. As surely as it ended in ruin for those men who just left the room."

"Why will it end in ruin?"

"Because it is destined from the beginning to fail."

"Suppose that's a risk I'm willing to take?"

Hortense shrugged and lay back with her eyes closed and her hands folded in her lap as if she had lost all further interest in the conversation. Simpson struggled to his feet and stood gazing down at his hostess with a wooden expression. At length he wrenched his eyes away and gestured to Linda and Rawlins.

"Come on, let's get out of here. We've got work ahead of us."

IV

IN THE early days of his career Rawlins had helped pay expenses by assisting a photographer who specialized in art for the fashion magazines. He soon learned that one of the first rules of the business was that everything must be done in a hurry. Thus if the editors of *Fascination* decided that their June issue needed some photographs of a model in a seersucker bathing suit reclining on the beach in front of the Rock of Gibraltar,

they would generally be notified along about the middle of March. By flying to the Mediterranean, working feverishly for a week, and airmailing the negatives back to the photographic laboratory, the color prints would be on the editors' desk the day before the deadline. After this they would be notified that owing to a switch in plans the prints would not go into the magazine until the August issue. Hence, working under pressure was no new experience in Rawlins' life; in fact, long ago he had come to regard it as a natural part of his existence.

What Rawlins now discovered was that he knew nothing whatever about working under pressure. Trying to keep pace with Simpson made his best previous efforts seem as leisurely as reporting for a college annual. Fundamentally, however, it was really quite simple. You worked as hard as you could every second and then you quit for awhile. When you woke up you started in all over again. The chief difficulty was trying to relax and go to sleep. There was no escaping the burning heat. The brassy glare of the sun behind the cirrus haze was always beating down. The pressure never abated.

"How do you manage to stand up under the strain?" Rawlins asked one day, watching Linda's

fingers flying over the keys of her typewriter.

They had set up temporary offices on the second level of the palace, considerably removed from those occupied by Queen Hortense and her retinue of maidens. Their typewriters and mechanical computers contrasted strangely with the rococo ornamentation of the suite, as out of place as a tractor in a Watteau painting.

"You learn to manage after-while," Linda replied, giving him an arch smile. "You decide what you've got to do and then you try to do it. See?"

"You mean you really do?"

"Of course. Why not?"

"I've read articles about people who claimed they regulated their lives that way but I never supposed they actually existed. I always thought they were characters those fellows dreamed up who write these HOW TO books."

He regarded her with frank curiosity. "Tell me, how did a girl like you ever get tied up with a bunch like this in the first place?"

Linda's eyes were amused and irritated by turns. "Does that interest you?"

"Yes, it does. Oh, of course, if you'd rather not . . ."

"No, I don't mind." Her fingers strayed idly over the keys.

"It all happened by accident nearly seven years ago. That was just before Simpson began his rise to power. I was sitting at a lunch counter drinking a cup of coffee and feeling thoroughly miserable. Besides having a cold, I had just lost my job through no fault of mine, and jobs were hard to get then.

"While I was sitting there I noticed this man watching me. I tried not to pay attention, thinking he would go away in a minute. Instead he came directly to where I was sitting and took the seat beside me.

"Young woman," he said, "do you know that the blood-vessels that supply your lower extremities all run down the back of your legs? That when you cross your legs as you are now you automatically shut off the flow to your arteries thus imposing an unnecessary strain on your heart?"

"You're the first man who ever told me he didn't like to see me with my legs crossed," I said.

"He didn't crack a smile.

"Besides putting an extra strain on your heart your present posture also increases the amount of nervous energy required to send the blood through your body."

"He gave me a look that went clear through me. You look as

if you were rather low on nervous energy right now."

"I am. I just lost my job."

"How would you like to work for me?"

"I don't care. I'd as leave work for you as anyone else."

"He scribbled his name on the back of a card. 'Go to this address and tell them to put you to work immediately.'

"I examined the card, feeling more amused than anything else. 'Wait a minute. How much are you paying me first?'

"Twice what you got before," he snapped. "Now get along—and don't cross your legs any more."

She laughed. "Well, that's the way it began. Working for Simpson was like nothing I had ever done before. He seemed to take possession of you and carry you along with him. Half a dozen times I tried to break away, but it was so much easier to keep on going. There's a fascination about Simpson that gets hold of you and won't let you stop, even though you hate him sometimes."

"You mean you hate him? You hate Simpson?"

"Oh, goodness, yes. Lots of times. It's the way you have to work sometimes on a project you know is silly and ridiculous underneath. But once Simpson launches a campaign there's no

turning back. When you get an organization started involving thousands of people and millions of dollars everything connected with it becomes important merely because it's so big. Because it's Simpson.

"I remember, one time, we were trying to launch a new comic character on television called Old Dad Dill Pickle. We spent months working on that character. Strong men sweat and suffered, laughed and cried, and gave the best they had of their head and hand. It was play, but desperately grim sort of play. And all so that Old Dad Dill Pickle could amuse the children every afternoon in the hope of getting the little monsters to buy more prefabricated popcorn or whatever it was."

Rawlins came over and clasped her hand fondly in his. "You know something?"

"No. What?"

"I think maybe I can love you now. I couldn't before, but now it's all right. You've relieved my mind tremendously."

"Is that the only effect my life story has had upon you?"

"No, there are some other things, but that's the most important. Someday I'll tell you all about it." He strolled over to one of the long oval windows facing the sun.

Linda glanced at the stack of

papers on his desk. "How's the report coming?"

"Not so good. Interviewing these people is nothing but grief. Not that I ever supposed it would be easy."

"What's the matter? The women again?"

"Not entirely. For some reason it seems hard to reach the Venusian mind. I have the feeling all the time there's some barrier between us. Another trouble is they're all a-twitter over something. Can't get them to settle down and answer questions."

"Now *that* is something I can explain," Linda said. "They're getting ready for the Festival of Fire. We're all invited by special invitation of Queen Hortense. Simpson wants us to be on hand wearing our very best behavior."

Rawlins regarded her incredulously. "But I thought he was sore at her. After the way she predicted he'd fail and everything."

Linda laughed with genuine amusement.

"Of course not. Oh, I think he was really peeved there for a minute. But now he'll make every effort to win her over. You don't get ahead by increasing the number of your enemies."

"No, I suppose not," Rawlins agreed absently. "What's this Festival of Fire thing anyhow?"

"Some sort of ritual they celebrate every so often at sunset. Haven't you noticed how they always keep a fire burning in one of the altars beside the palace? It's a symbol of their way of life. I don't understand it myself entirely."

Rawlins turned back to the window. He thought the sun had been stuck in the sky over by those three volcanoes with the smoke perpetually hanging above them. Now, for the first time, it occurred to him that the sun might actually set some time.

"So that's what everybody is so wrought up about. All right. Tell Simpson he can count on me for the fireworks."

The members of Simpson's staff were assembled on the balcony of the palace chatting in low tones or peering over the edge at the throng below. Although outwardly calm there was a certain restlessness in the queen's guests. An attitude of covert watchfulness mingled with strained expectancy. A trained observer would have said that their behavior corresponded to that of well-bred people who are dying for a drink but are too polite to mention the fact to their host.

"What I wouldn't give for a good stiff shot of bourbon," Rawlins groaned, trying to un-

glue his shirt from his arms. "Just straight bourbon and ice. Nothing else."

"Perhaps the heat will let down after sunset," Straker said, gazing at the red disk of the sun that hung like a lumpy balloon over the three crater cones.

"Well, if I don't get some kind of liquid refreshment pretty quick I'll pass out sure," Rawlins said. "Where are Simpson and Queen Hortense? What are we waiting for?"

"I think they're coming now," Linda said.

Queen Hortense swept into the room followed by Simpson and a troupe of girls evidently in ceremonial costume. The queen was even lovelier if possible than before. Her eyes were bright as stars and there was new color in her pale cheeks.

Despite the oppressive heat Simpson managed to present his customary scrubbed appearance. Although the moisture was trickling down the side of his thick neck and his collar was wilted, the three prongs of his pocket handkerchief were as crisp and alert as ever.

He advanced to the center of the room and held up his hand for silence.

"This evening we are privileged to witness one of the most ancient and honored of

Venusian customs—the Festival of Fire," he said, beaming upon them like a fat moon. "The Festival of Fire is celebrated only at sunset. Although sunset here occurs about every twenty of our days the Festival of Fire occurs only when the Venusian moon is in conjunction with the sun at nightfall, an event that takes place at intervals of roughly once a year. Then the fire which has burned low since the last Festival is lighted anew to dispel the darkness gathering over the planet.

"As I understand, this ceremony is associated with Venusian social customs of long standing. If these customs perchance appear strange and bizarre to us let us remember that many of our customs on Earth would certainly prove equally puzzling to a Venusian. In fact, there are some of ours I was never able to understand myself."

With a bow and a smile he backed away leaving Hortense in the center of the room.

"Rather a nice little speech," Rawlins said. "Didn't think the old boy had it in him."

"It ought to be good," Linda told him. "I wrote it."

Again the sight of Hortense made Rawlins catch his breath. Her beauty was almost too perfect. The folds of her gown had a way of parting, unexpectedly

revealing glimpses of a figure that could only be described as dazzling. Yet there was a sweet unconsciousness in her manner that was altogether disarming in its innocence.

"The Festival of Fire is our oldest custom," she said gravely. "Although each word and gesture are rigorously prescribed by tradition yet the ceremony actually represents the casting aside of tradition, the banishing of habits that if continued would lead us into fixed patterns of thought and action. For we never wish to be bound. We wish to go on our way serene and untrammeled as the sun and moon in their courses. And so at every Festival we renew ourselves by drawing fresh youth and vitality from the fire."

As she spoke they became aware of faint voices raised from the square in a kind of chant repeated over and over again, each time rising higher and more compelling than before. There was an eerie quality to the refrain arousing an emotion akin to that of the magic fire music from *Die Walküre*.

"We must go now," Hortense cried. "In a moment the sun will sink behind the crater cones. You will find food and drink for your refreshment."

She hurried from the room followed by her maidens.

"Queen Hortense has kindly prepared a buffet supper for us," Simpson said, when they were alone. "She suggested that we partake while we are waiting for the commencement of the ceremony."

It was the first opportunity the men had had to sample Venusian fare, so that they inspected the food laid out for them with curiosity not unmixed with a certain degree of trepidation. There were fruits similar to the apricot, peach, and pear; a form of melon about the size of a cucumber which, upon being sliced, revealed the glistening pink flesh within; and platters stacked high with slices of gray and white meat exhaling a spicy odor. Simpson set an example by boldly helping himself to generous portions of each.

"Where's that drink the queen mentioned?" Rawlins said, scanning the table eagerly.

"Here you are," Stracker told him, filling a glass from one of the pitchers. "Happy days."

Rawlins sniffed the colorless liquid suspiciously. "Must be straight gin, I guess."

"You don't suppose . . ." He lifted the glass and took a cautious sip. "Good lord, it *is*! It's water. Plain water!"

Stracker chuckled softly. "Apparently they haven't learned to distill spirits yet. How won-

derful! Think of the whole world of discovery that lies, all unexplored, before them."

"Well anyhow, it's wet," Rawlins said philosophically. "Fairly cold, too." He emptied the glass without taking it from his lips and poured himself another. "Let's take our supper out on the balcony, shall we? I want to see this renewal business."

The chant was becoming more insistent every moment. Now the people in the square were standing like statues with one arm raised toward the setting sun. Hortense and her maidens were advancing slowly toward the altar piled with combustibles.

"I see the moon!" Linda cried, clapping her hands.

"Where?" Rawlins demanded. "Don't believe they've got a moon here."

"Just above the sun. Like a bright star."

"Hmm. So it is. Too small to show a disk, apparently."

The music was becoming almost too poignant in its intensity to bear. The dying sun had suddenly become a symbol of everything Rawlins had longed and cherished in his life. And now it was going away. Sinking into the underworld. A fragment of verse from childhood came back to him.

*Alas, alas, fair Ines,
She went away with song,
With music waiting on her steps,
And shouting of the throng..*

The figures in the square stood as if transfixated under the amber rays of the sun as Hortense mounted the steps to the altar. A man was holding a torch over a nest of glowing coals, turning it and nursing it into life. Only a dull red sliver of the sun remained. Would it never go? At last—it was gone. The star shone out above it clear and bright.

The man knelt and offered the torch to Queen Hortense. She seized it in both her hands and held it aloft for some time as if repeating an incantation. Suddenly she turned and flung it upon the altar. The fire was a feeble thing at first, crawling over the pyre in a flickering blue line, slowly spreading and strengthening, then flaring up in a rush of yellow flame illuminating the whole square.

A roar burst from the throng. The music dissolved into hoarse cries and shrill peals of laughter. The people threw up their arms and ran about, embracing one another rapturously.

Rawlins felt immoderately excited. His heart was pounding furiously and his scalp was prickling as if his hair was

standing on end. He ran his tongue over his lips. Strange how dry they were. The inside of his mouth was dry, too. He turned to Stracker trying to say something but the words stuck in his throat.

"Rawlins, what's the matter. Are you all right?"

He saw the doctor and Linda regarding him anxiously. He grinned and pointed to his mouth trying to make them understand.

"Confounded heat," he croaked. "Think I'll get myself 'nother drink."

He started toward the tables at the back of the room but his legs felt numb as if they were asleep. The noise from the crowd was almost drowned by the ringing in his ears. He swayed . . . felt himself falling . . .

"So that's renewing your youth," he whispered.

Stracker was bending over him a puzzled expression in his eyes. It was the last thing he remembered.

V

HESTOR HILDEGARDE was being very stern with her television audience.

"Now I'm going to say that again so that everyone of you will be sure to hear. (Pause). There is no such thing as a home-

ly woman. Get it? *There . . . is . . . no . . . such . . . thing . . . as . . . a . . . homely . . . woman.* There are only women who let themselves be homely. (Triumphantly) Makes a difference, doesn't it? One year ago—yes. Then there might have been an excuse. But today there is not the single, teeny-weeniest excuse why you can't be the wonderful YOU that nature intended.

"For no matter what your special problem may be—bulging waistline—flabby skin—brittle hair—remember that to the government charm counselor there are no beauty problems. She will call to advise you in the privacy of your own home. She will select the makeup that is most flattering to you. A makeup that will give your skin that dewy fresh eye-catching loveliness you have always dreamed about. A shade of lipstick that vibrates to your personality. Exotic perfumes that are like the breath of romance. So call your government charm counselor now. Remember—beauty is only as far away as the dial on your telephone.

"And now we come to our fashion forecast. Well, girls, there are curves ahead . . ."

Rawlins emitted a low moaning sound from the depths of the armchair where he was ensconced, gloomily contemplating

ing Hestor Hildegarde's carefully preserved features on the television screen. With a great effort he propelled himself across the room and turned off the set.

"Nobody can ever realize how I hate myself sometimes," he confided to Linda, busily captioning photographs at her desk in the corner. "And to think I have to help promote that stuff!"

"How's the beauty campaign coming?" she inquired.

"The Venusians are barely nibbling so far. But Simpson has some powerful bait in that high-pressure glamor stuff he's handing out. A woman's lot on this planet hasn't been a particularly happy one in years past. Only the very prettiest married, and the others had to take whatever they could get. Until Simpson showed up they never knew there were more than about two ways to catch a husband. Now they think they've all got a chance."

"How're the men taking it?"

"Remarkably well, considering. Frankly, I doubt if they realize what's happening to them yet. They're such good-natured, easy-going cusses I don't believe they'd recognize a social revolution if it hit them in the face."

He bent nearer, lowering his voice. "Baker over in the cosmetics lab was telling me a good

one that illustrates what I mean. It seems that a couple of travelling men from Mars met a girl from Venus—”

“Shush,” said Linda. “Here comes J.D. now.”

Simpson entered with a handful of manuscripts which he placed on Linda's desk. He nodded vacantly to Rawlins, pulled up a chair, and adjusted his glasses.

“I'd like to get your opinion on some of these manuscripts, Linda,” he said, tapping the one on top with a red pencil. “Here's one I was planning to run in an early issue of *Your Wife and Mine*. About how the neat, well-groomed man always gets the highest paying job. You see, we're trying to get at the men through the women. I wish you'd see if you can't liven it up a bit. I think it needs more of the feminine slant.”

“I'll do my best,” Linda promised.

Simpson fished another manuscript from the pile.

“Now here's an article for *Scepter* called *Nine Paths to the Altar*. Try and think up another one if you can. I think it would sound much stronger if we could make it an even ten.”

“Much,” said Linda, writing a *Ten* over the *Nine*.

Simpson shuffled the papers awkwardly laying down one and

picking up another as if debating how to proceed.

“Er . . . I'd like to get your reaction to an idea Carson submitted for an advertisement recently. Carson's in charge of our sanitary products plant now, you know. He thinks it might go over big with the women if we ran a full page photograph in color of Queen Hortense standing by the balcony looking kind of pensive, with the one word WHY underneath.”

Linda shook her head very slowly. “I'd turn thumbs down if I were you.”

Simpson heaved a sigh.

“Same way I felt,” he told her, apparently much relieved. “There's some of these things you can't push too fast.”

He leaned back and tapped the pencil thoughtfully between his teeth.

“Curious how hard it is to make people do things for their own good. Been fighting it all my life. Remember what a time I had on Earth, changing the eating habits of the nation. You couldn't get 'em to take a bite of kidney or brain or spleen for love nor money. Best part of a cow according to the docs, but there was a strong tradition against it. Practically had to ram it down their throats at first. Now I suppose I'm up against the same proposition here.”

Simpson's hair is certainly getting thinner, Rawlins thought. And those lines around his eyes certainly weren't there a year ago. And was it his imagination, or did the tips of Simpson's handkerchief droop ever so slightly?

"Speaking of meat, did I tell you I'd started importing livestock?" Simpson asked, brightening up a little. "Just got in a prize Holstein bull-calf named Beau James the Fourth and a young heifer named Royal Betsy of Green Acres. Jim and Betsy we call 'em for short. I'm planning to build up a whole herd. One thing I've missed on Venus is my glass of fresh milk at bedtime."

"That must have been quite a job, ferrying in a bull-calf," Rawlins observed.

"It took some careful planning," Simpson admitted. "I was lucky in getting the services of an expert vet. Maybe you've heard of him Dr. Hoskins. Got a regular bedside manner when it comes to animals. He brought 'em through in fine shape. Made the trip like old time space men." There was a faraway look in Simpson's eyes. "You won't believe it, but I used to be able to milk cows when I was a boy. Probably lost the knack of it now."

He sighed and returned to the papers.

"I've picked out half a dozen articles from the stuff we've run in our other magazines during the past year. See if you can't cut it down about half for our digest magazine. Easiest way is to leave out the explanations. People don't like explanations. Best way is just to tell 'em things."

Linda turned over some of the sheets. "I never did understand this one by our psychologist on *Be Glad You're Broke*. First we tell the Venusians to work harder to make more money and then we turn right around and tell them how nice it is to be without it."

"Not the point," Simpson grunted. "Point is nobody ever makes all the money he wants. Stop the first man you meet on the street and ask him how he's doing. Chances are he'll weep on your shoulder. So tell 'em something encouraging. Sympathize with 'em. Tell 'em all about the little homely things of life that are free, like love—friendship—faith. You know what I mean. How everything generally works out for the best in the end."

He heaved a bitter sigh. "Why, take my own case, for instance. Happiest days of my life were when I was a kid back on the farm in South Dakota milking cows."

"Why don't you go back there now?" Rawlins suggested.

"Gee, if I only could. People won't let me, that's why. Never get a minute's peace any more."

He sat up suddenly as if struck by an idea.

"Say, maybe you got something there, Rawlins. How about a photograph of me with my sleeves rolled up, milking Betsy? Ought to make a hit with the populace, eh? I could practice when nobody was looking."

"We'll make a note of it," Rawlins said.

Simpson went over the remaining articles in a hurry, using the red pencil ruthlessly on some, dismissing others with scarcely a glance.

"Main idea to aim for is a cheerful, wholesome feeling," he told Linda. "How things may seem hard now but they'll get better if we just keep on plugging the way some other guys have done. Once in awhile we can run an article criticizing something to keep the people stirred up a little. But nothing really big, you understand."

He tossed the last paper aside and looked inquiringly at Rawlins. "Well, boy, how are you doing? Got the dope on that housing survey yet?"

"Well, not exactly in the form I'd like it," Rawlins said, reaching for a manila folder. "As you

know, I've had to train all my field workers and that takes time. Even after they're trained it's hard to get reliable data. The Venusians have such a curious attitude. It's even hard to convince them of the importance of polling them in the first place."

Simpson nodded impatiently. "Okay, so it's tough. Now what you got on this housing thing?"

"Well" it's not too favorable, I'm afraid," said Rawlins, indicating a row of figures. "Some of the old folks can't get used to all that glass and chromium plate. Too far from nature, I guess. And the men complain that they never get to see their wives anymore. They claim the women spend all their time in the bathroom now."

"It's fantastic," Simpson said. "Simply fantastic. After all the work we did installing those multi-purpose non-bottleneck bathroom fixtures. Why a year ago they didn't know what a bathroom was. Now they got the nerve to gripe about how much worse off they are."

He began pacing back and forth across the floor nervously clasping and unclasping his hands behind him. Suddenly he stopped, gravely loosened his belt, and stood rigidly at attention with his chest thrown out and his stomach pulled in. Slowly he began to exhale, letting the air

escape from his lungs until a gap of a couple of inches appeared between his waistline and the top of his pants. Then he inhaled, at the same time rising to the tips of his toes. He repeated this operation a dozen times. After which he stuffed his shirt back into place and gave his pants a hitch.

"Breath control," he explained. "Wonderful way to relax when you begin to tighten up. Ought to try it sometime."

He tightened his belt another notch. "Now about this housing report. . . . There's probably nothing the matter except with us. Not giving our ideas a chance to sink in, maybe. Trying to move too fast again. We've got the folks all mixed up and confused. Instead of selling 'em on our program."

He lay back with his eyes closed and his hands dangling limply from his shoulders. "Someday you'll notice a change," he intoned. "An upsurge. A quickening of interest. Then the awakening and the rush to get in. We're building on a firm technique. It never failed on Earth. It won't fail us now."

"But how can you be so sure?" Rawlins said, stuffing the papers back in the folder.

Simpson sat up and opened his eyes.

"Because something in here tells me it won't," he declared, tapping himself on the chest. "You want to get those failure thoughts out of your mind, my boy. Think success thoughts instead. Always remember this—it takes energy to fail. But success attracts success. Success—"

A woman burst into the room followed by half a dozen others. It took Rawlins a full second to recognize the agitated features of Hestor Hildegarde. She never hesitated, but made straight for Simpson.

"It's happened," she cried. "It's happened!"

Simpson hastily backed away. "What's happened?"

"The beauty program. Just when I thought it was going to be such a flop."

She clasped her hands together in a kind of ecstasy.

"Here were these poor women practically perishing for beauty treatments. Here we were practically dying to give it to them. And then what happens? Nothing. Absolutely nothing. We couldn't make the slightest impression. Not a dent.

"And then it started. They began coming in . . . some of the younger ones at first, holding hands as if they were scared to death. All so trembly and wide-eyed. They were simply precious. Then they began com-

ing in threes and fours. Then in droves. Now we're positively swamped—covered up."

She flung her arms around Simpson and planted a resounding smack on his cheek. "Darling, they've gone simply wild over glamor. You must send back to Earth immediately for more of everything."

"Well, that's certainly mighty fine," Simpson said, disentangling himself. "That's great. I'll tell Ballard Kingsley to get busy right away. He's in complete charge back there, you know. In the meantime, carry on the best way you can. But don't let them cool off. Keep them coming. Promise them anything."

Simpson drove one fist into the palm of his hand.

"What did I tell you?" he said to Rawlins. "It's the awakening . . . the rush to get in. Now we don't need to wait. We can go ahead fast. Ah, I wonder what Queen Hortense will say now?"

"Mr. Simpson."

A tall gaunt man in a white gown was standing in the doorway regarding them solemnly. Simpson's face broke into a grin.

"Why, doctor, come in. Come in."

He waved his hand at the assembly.

"Folks, want you to meet Doctor Hoskins. Best vet in the

state of Wisconsin. Trust him with my life."

Doctor Hoskins bowed slightly. "It's about Jim and Betsy that I wanted to see you about, Mr. Simpson."

"Well, what about them?"

"They're dead. Passed out not ten minutes ago. I thought you'd want to know right away."

"Dead." Simpson looked bewildered. "But I don't want them dead. See here—I won't have them dead."

"Well, I'm sorry, but they're dead just the same. Nobody feels it any more than I do."

He walked into the room, his chin sunk upon his chest. "I thought I noticed signs of testlessness about an hour ago. They kept threshing around in their stalls and bawling but I attributed it to the reaction from the trip. But when they started gasping for breath and getting wobbly in the knees I knew something was wrong. Their symptoms certainly had me puzzled. I'd have said it was impaction of the *omasum* except that there didn't seem to be any bloating worth mentioning. Well, I injected pilocarpine and when that didn't help I shoved in a twentieth of a grain of strychnine, but that didn't help either. They both died a few minutes later."

News of the double tragedy

cast a pall over the room. Even Hestor Hildegarde was momentarily subdued.

"Say, those sound like the same symptoms I had the first time I ate any Venusian food," Rawlins exclaimed. "Tied me up in a hard knot. I've had to be mighty careful ever since."

"Yeah," Simpson muttered disconsolately, "only thing is you pulled through and the cows didn't."

"Under the circumstances I'd like to do an autopsy," Doctor Hoskins said. "If I can have your permission, Mr. Simpson."

"Sure. Sure," Simpson told him. "Go right ahead. And . . . thanks for letting me know."

"IT'S the beginning of the end," Rawlins declared, when everyone had left. He sat down in the nearest chair and swung his legs over the side. "With the women on Simpson's side, Queen Hortense is lost."

"Venus was so different when we came here," Linda sighed. "It was all so charming and idyllic. Now look at it."

Rawlins regarded her quizzically.

"So you don't like it now, eh? You don't like paneled bathrooms, thermo-controlled forced air heaters, automatic garbage pulverators—"

"Yes, I like them very much.

What I don't like is the way Simpson keeps us building so furiously toward some vague goal in the future that we never really have the time to savor them properly."

Rawlins sank back lazily in his chair.

"Don't know that I altogether agree with you," he told her. "In my opinion most of us live in a rush because we like it. Give the average man everything he wants and what happens? Why, he's miserable. He doesn't want to sit around savoring life. He wants to devour it as fast as he can."

"Oh, I don't know about that."

"Well, it's true whether you want to admit it or not. Now when it comes to the Venusians I'm not so sure. They seem simple enough on the surface, but in some ways they're pretty deep."

"It's all Simpson's fault."

"No. We were right in there pitching, too."

"Well, we couldn't help ourselves. That was our job." Suddenly she buried her face in her hands. "Oh, I hate Simpson!"

Rawlins patted her gently on the shoulder. "Stop it, Linda. You're talking nonsense, you know."

Linda shook her head vigorously. Her sobs came in long, intermittent gasps.

"Perhaps Simpson's gods aren't our gods, but does that mean that ours are any better than his?" Rawlins murmured. "Now be a good girl and dry your eyes."

Linda sat up and began to repair her makeup, an operation that consisted chiefly in making seemingly ineffectual little dabs at her face. The seriousness with which Linda approached this task held Rawlins fascinated. Although the net change in her appearance was insignificant, the improvement in her morale was apparently immense. Empires might totter in the balance, he reflected, nations tremble on the brink of ruin, and worlds collide, but time must stop while a woman repairs her makeup.

Rawlins waited till the last infinitesimal bit of lipstick and eye-shadow had been applied. Then very deliberately he got up and sauntered toward the door.

"Where are you going?" Linda asked.

"Just thought I'd try to see Queen Hortense, if I could."

"What for?"

"Oh, nothing much. Just an idea that occurred to me."

Linda hurried over beside him. "Now, you wait. Before we see her there's one thing I want understood. We're not doing anything behind Simpson's back. Is that clear?"

"Say, listen, who invited you to come along in the first place?"

"Well, I'm coming anyhow."

They faced each other defiantly. Before Linda could move Rawlins had grabbed her around the waist and aimed a kiss at her lips. Linda tried to duck but Rawlins had the advantage. There was a brief struggle from which Rawlins emerged victorious.

"As a matter of fact, I thought I'd see if Simpson wanted to come along," Rawlins said smiling down at her. "Then there can't be any doubt about everything being on the up-and-up."

"Well, I think it would be nicer that way," Linda said, reaching for her handbag. "But now you'll have to wait till I put my face on again."

The square in front of the palace was dark and deserted. The only light came from the fire burning in the altar and the glow of the aurora shining through the thin cirrus clouds. Now the aurora resembled long tiers of green and violet curtains hanging in the sky, shifting, intangible, unreal. Linda shivered.

"I'd never get used to those auroras if I lived on Venus a hundred years."

Rawlins studied the display with the detached eye of the scientific observer.

"Venus must have a consider-

ably stronger magnetic field than the Earth's," he remarked. "Magnetic axis probably inclined quite a bit farther from the axis of rotation, too."

Even as they watched the curtains dissolved into nothingness. For a moment there was only darkness. Then gradually the whole sky behind the palace became suffused by a crimson glow like the light from a distant forest fire.

"It's a sign," Linda whispered. "A warning of danger."

Rawlins snorted. "Now how could an electrical discharge through the upper atmosphere of Venus conceivably be interpreted as a warning placed in the sky for our special benefit? A remnant of superstitious fear from your primitive ancestors, my dear."

"Next time we come here I hope it won't be so confounded dark," Simpson growled, stumbling over a loose flagstone. "I'm going to have a fountain installed in the middle of the square with colored lights that go on and off. Runs through the whole rainbow every two minutes. Ought to look pretty nice, don't you think?"

Rawlins nodded. "Who says we haven't got art on Venus?"

The palace loomed black against the red auroral glow. The door at the entrance stood wide

open as usual revealing the hallway within dimly lighted by flickering torches.

"Doesn't Queen Hortense ever lock up the place?" Rawlins said. "How does she know somebody won't try to run off with the crown jewels?"

"I wanted to put in electric burglar alarms and floodlights," Simpson said, "but she wouldn't hear of it. Claimed the people would think she was crazy."

They found a young girl seated near the door playing some stringed instrument. She smiled as they approached, while her fingers continued to ripple over the strings. If she felt any resentment toward the people who had usurped the position of her queen it was not apparent from her manner.

"We wonder if Queen Hortense could see us for a few minutes?" Rawlins inquired. "Tell her we apologize for intruding in this way but there was a matter came up we'd like to get settled at once if we could."

"I'll go see," the girl said, laying aside her instrument. "You can wait over there on that bench."

It was the first time Rawlins had been in the palace since they had set up temporary offices in one of the back rooms more than a year ago. There was a

delightful air of ease and informality about the queen's domestic establishment that he found distinctly restful. Strolling down the long halls with their al fresco type of architecture, the profusion of blossoms overflowing from the vases on every side, and the girls in their casual white tunics, always gave him the sensation of having inserted himself into one of those Maxfield Parrish scenes that used to hang over every mantelpiece in the land. Except that the blue vitriol sky was missing.

"The queen don't go in much for improvements," Simpson grunted. "You show her a new gadget and she just raises one eyebrow. Makes you feel like a guy pulling rabbits out of a hat. It's a cute way to produce rabbits but nature can do it so much better."

"Well, I see you've made a little progress," Linda remarked, nodding toward a door down the hall marked *Powder Room*.

"Queen Hortense will see you now," the girl called down to them. "She's waiting for you on the balcony."

The incline to the second level grew darker with every step. They were in the middle of the Venusian night; more than a week must pass as time is reckoned on the Earth before the blackness would begin to resolve

into the gray that foretold the dawn. Nearing the balcony they became aware of a vibrant twanging sound such as might have been made by a man playing a banjo at the bottom of a well. The two men paused listening intently.

"Oh, come on," Linda said impatiently. "What are you waiting for?"

They found Hortense reclining on her couch à la Madame Récamier as usual, watching the dancing figures on the screen of her television set. She smiled and extended one slim arm in welcome. In her serene presence Rawlins immediately felt himself endowed with all the social graces of an untrained, overgrown puppy.

There was a constrained silence while they sat watching the television screen. The illuminated square held their attention enthralled. There was no escape from it. You could look away, but inevitably your eyes came back again. Rawlins finally gave up and sat staring grimly at the characters who never seemed to wear anything but evening clothes.

"They're so restless," Hortense murmured, turning to Simpson. "Are the people in your world always so disturbed?"

"Now you mustn't take these pictures of ours too seriously,"

he chuckled. "After all they're just plays. What we call escape drama."

"Escape drama?"

"Uh huh. Something to make the people laugh. Get their mind off their troubles for awhile."

The picture finally ended with a prolonged blast from the orchestra. Queen Hortense snapped off the set leaving the room in darkness except for the light of a tall candle burning by the door. Rawlins subsided gratefully into the shadows. Beyond the balcony there was still a dull red tinge from the aurora.

"You've got to pardon us for butting in on you this way," Simpson began, "but Rawlins thought we could speak our mind better, alone this way, than if we had to keep moving and seconding the motion and all that junk."

"It wasn't planned at all," Rawlins assured. "We never thought about it ourselves till a moment ago."

"You see, here's the situation," Simpson hurried on. "It's been more'n a year since we made that little agreement of ours." He chuckled reminiscently. "Now, the way things are picking up it strikes me there can't be much doubt about the way the wind blows. You can see for yourself what I've accomplished. When I took over, this

planet looked like a Dakota farm two installments behind on the mortgage. Now look at it. Things are really humming. A man can hope to get somewhere, today."

Queen Hortense smiled vaguely but did not reply. Rawlins could not decide whether she failed to comprehend what Simpson was driving at or whether she was just bored. She lay on the couch with her knees pulled up under her, like a child, exposing the soft rounded contour of her legs.

"Now, I know what you're probably thinking," Simpson said. "You're thinking are the people any happier than they were before? Well, I don't know. Happiness is a funny thing. You show me a man who says he's happy and I'll show you a man who's dead from the neck up. Gone to seed. Stagnating. Happy people never get very far. It's the restless, dissatisfied people you've got to thank for all our progress. Why, if I felt happy for more'n a minute, I'd know we were through right then."

"Maybe we are through. All through and don't know it."

The words had escaped Rawlins involuntarily. He heard them as if they were spoken by someone else, like a disembodied voice on the television screen.

"I'm surprised to hear a statement like that from a man in

my organization." There was a hurt note in Simpson's voice.

"What I meant was . . ."

Rawlins found himself struggling to figure out just what he did mean. He knew what he felt, but it was hard to get it into words.

"What I mean was . . . Well, I can't help wondering if the headed, aggressive people are the ones we do have to thank for most of our progress. In the encyclopaedia you'll find most of the names belong to prophets and dreamers . . . people who didn't seem to amount to much in their time. But they had something people liked and so they kept on going—"

"Like what, for instance?"

"Well . . . well like that candle back there by the door. The candle should have disappeared years ago along with the horse and buggy. The candle has had all kinds of competition from the coal-oil lamp, natural gas, and electricity. And yet the candle is still going strong. They make more candles today than ever before in the history of the world.

"It's hard to explain but there's something so restful and soothing about candle light. And beautiful. A woman never looks so beautiful as she does by candlelight." He glanced at Linda.

"Okay," Simpson said, "so it's beautiful. Well, that's fine. I'm all for it. If there's people on Venus who want these old fashioned gimmicks why they can have 'em. We could fix up an old time Venusian village. Have everything kind of quaint the way it used to be. The waitresses running around in those little nightshirts like they used to wear and all that. Make a swell tourist attraction. Bound to make money if it's promoted right."

He sighed deeply.

"But that isn't what I come to see you about. Here's the point, I don't like the setup here at all. I'm the real leader here, and yet I've got to keep doing business through you all the time. Now we ought to get it straightened out one way or the other. Let the people know which one of us is tops."

"Why don't you let the people decide it, then?" Rawlins said very casually.

It took awhile for the idea to sink in, but when it finally hit bottom the result was explosive.

"By God, why don't we?" Simpson cried. "Put it up to 'em straight. Have an election."

"An election?" Queen Hortense looked from one to the other bewildered. "I'm afraid I don't understand."

"The people vote on it—see? You ask 'em: 'Do you want to

string along with Queen Hortense or do you want to go ahead with Simpson?" Now what could be fairer than that?"

"But my people love me," Hortense protested. "They would never choose against me."

"Listen," said Simpson impatiently, "why don't we make a deal? You turn the reins over to me. You can go on living here as queen but I want full authority and I want the people to know it. Of course, if you still think you have a chance."

"Oh, but I have. I know I have."

Linda laid her hand on the queen's arm. "Don't you understand? You had better take Mr. Simpson's offer. The people are fascinated by this new way of life. They are flocking to him. You must believe it."

Looking at the queen Rawlins thought what a forelorn figure she made lying there brooding over what Linda had told her. He had never felt so sorry for anyone in his life.

"There is a temple outside the city not so far from where you landed," Hortense said. "A little temple just off the highway hidden by trees and flowers. Where lovers often go strolling hand in hand."

"I think I remember it," Rawlins told her. "A little stone

building almost hidden by the jungle."

"You will find my answer there in the temple," Hortense said. "If you ever go there. It has been so many years now—"

"Someday we'll have a long talk about that temple of yours," Simpson interrupted. "But the question before the house now is whether we hold this election or not. Whichever one of us wins, the other steps down and out. That's got to be definitely understood."

"Wait a minute," Rawlins told him. "Naturally you'd win. When you've got complete control of every means of reaching the people. What kind of an agreement is that?"

"Ah, what's the difference? You know she hasn't got a prayer."

"Who says she hasn't?" Rawlins blazed. "You let me handle her on a fair and equal basis and we'll see whether she's got a chance or not."

Simpson regarded him calmly. "You think so?"

"Yes!"

"All right then go ahead. Consider yourself official palace campaign manager. I'll guarantee you get equal rights on all channels of public communication. Okay?"

"Okay."

Simpson rubbed his hands briskly.

"Long time since I've been in a good, red-hot political campaign," he said, grinning at Linda. "I'm going to get a lot of fun out of this. Wonder what Ballard Kingsley will think when he hears about this? Good old Kingsley! Boy, the times we used to have together."

He hooked his arm into Linda's.

"Well, good-bye, folks. Suppose we hold the election one terrestrial month from now. We'll be seeing you then. And don't forget, my boy, I'm counting on you to make it a good one."

With a wave of his hand he was gone with Linda along with him.

Rawlins sank down on the couch beside Hortense. Being alone with her frightened him in a way. It was first time he had ever had her beauty all to himself to examine at leisure. He fell to studying her face and figure minutely. God, what loveliness was hers. *It was like the radiance of an opium dream . . . a wild, eerie, unearthly beauty.* That was the word he wanted—unearthly. A beauty that was not of the Earth.

The music of the stringed instrument floated up from the hall, singing of a sadness that

was all the sweeter because of its utter hopelessness. The candle flame burned in the still air without a tremor. Queen Hortense lay back at full length, a dreamy expression in her eyes, with one arm dangling languidly over her side of the couch. Rawlins felt her hand against his, yet he made no move to touch her.

His feelings toward Queen Hortense were very complex.

VII

"**N**ow give me that again," Rawlins said into the telephone. "Simpson 58 per cent, Hortense 35 per cent, 7 per cent undecided." He scribbled the figures down on a pad of paper. "Have much trouble polling the people in that octant? Hmm. Well, don't worry about it now. The returns will begin coming in soon. Then we won't have to worry. We'll know."

An unnatural quiet hung over the Queen Hortense campaign headquarters. Despite the tireless efforts of the ventilating system the air was thick with tobacco smoke. A dozen men and women were disposed around the room in attitudes betokening deep dejection. The floor and furniture were littered with newspapers, colored stickers, and printed handouts. Several of the persons

present wore large buttons which posed the question WHO BUT HORTENSE?

One side of the room was dominated by a more-than-life-size photograph of Queen Hortense seated at a desk, her face turned around almost full view toward the camera. The picture gave the impression that it had been taken by some stealthy lensman who had stolen into the palace and snapped her majesty unawares while she was immersed deep in the affairs of state. There was an expression of gentle reproach in the queen's expression that said, more plainly than words, "How could you do this to me?" The photograph had taken sixty man hours on the part of an expert camera crew to reproduce, and Rawlins regarded it as little short of a masterpiece.

Trouble had dogged his steps from the start. First, the queen had balked at being photographed at all, and then, after her consent, she had been so delighted by the process that they were forced to include her entire retinue, including the maidens who had participated in the Festival of Fire. This would not have been such a job if the picture had turned out decently. But the faces that had come up from the bottom of the developing bath had been startling to say

the least. Thus, Queen Hortense, when printed, had persisted in turning out a smooth, glistening white, as if she had first been sandpapered and then sprayed with aluminum paint. The effect was finally traced to an infra-red dye in the film which gave no trouble in portrait photography on the Earth, but was disastrous when applied to the Venusian physiognomy.

Rawlins was mulling over some figures when Stracker sauntered into the room. The physician tapped him lightly on the shoulder.

"Take it easy," he admonished. "Maybe it won't be as bad as you think."

Rawlins shoved the papers aside. "I'm crazy to get into this business in the first place. To think I could beat a man like Simpson."

He kicked a chair in Stracker's direction.

"Sit down and take it easy. Results will be coming in any time now. How're things with the opposition? Getting all set for the big celebration, I suppose."

"Not exactly," Stracker replied easily. "I should say their attitude might be described as one of quiet confidence. Hoping for the best with their fingers crossed."

"Well, they might as well uncross 'em now," Rawlins growl-

ed. "Take a look at this. The final results of our complete comprehensive survey."

Stracker gave the sheet a casual glance. "I understand people who take polls have been known to make mistakes. Or hadn't you heard?"

"Listen," Rawlins snorted impatiently, "these results have been checked and rechecked by every sampling technique ever invented. We've gotten three times the amount of material we need to get a reliable result. Even admitting an error of seven or eight per cent, we're still way in the hole. Nope. No use kidding ourselves. Hortense is out and Simpson in."

Stracker picked up a campaign folder and began creasing it back and forth between his long firm fingers. "So you're thoroughly convinced of the reliability of your figures?"

"Well, I'm as sure as anyone can be about data of that sort."

"Congratulations," Stracker murmured. "In that case you're way out ahead of us."

"How's that?"

"As chief of the medical staff you know I've had general supervision of a lot of measurements and tests we've made on the Venusians. From similar measures on the Earth we thought we knew about what to expect. We knew, for example, that while

the average height of different races varies considerably yet the distribution in height is always the same. Invariably follows the normal or Gaussian law. One of the fundamental attributes of *homo sapiens*."

"Yes?" said Rawlins.

"Well, the Venusians don't fit into a normal law. Instead the distribution in their heights is decidedly skew. You can't tell a bunch of Venusians from a bunch of us just by looking at us. But you let me measure their heights and I can tell you which is which as soon as I can plot their histograms."

"The hell you can."

"Fact," Stracker declared. "They're peculiar in other ways, too. Their basal metabolism is considerably lower than ours. And their pituitary gland isn't so well developed. Same goes for the thymus in the males, although it appears to be about the same in the women. Then, take the period of gestation—"

"All very interesting," Rawlins observed dryly, "but what's that got to do with the election?"

"Nothing, probably," Stracker admitted. "I was just trying to lighten the gloom around here a little."

Rawlins scowled at the clock over the door. "Polls must have closed half an hour ago. What's

the matter with our election machinery?"

He waited impatiently.

"I think it's coming in now," someone called from the vicinity of the television set.

"First report from Octant Seven," a voice rasped. "Results have been slow, owing to our unfamiliarity with election procedure, but we shall make every effort to keep you informed as rapidly as possible. As you know, Octant Seven is the wildest and most desolate. . . ."

"Just give us the results," said Rawlins.

" . . . scattered returns out of an estimated two hundred thousand votes. Let's see . . . we have 1580 for Simpson . . . 720 for Queen Hortense. As I said before, these are only the first scattered returns from Octant Seven. . . ."

"Oh, lord, it's going to be worse than I thought," Rawlins groaned, watching the figures go up on the blackboard. "It wouldn't make any difference if the Venusians were full of buckshot and their veins flowed pure Gordon gin. We still couldn't win this election."

" . . . coming in faster now. To save time I'll only give you the approximate figures. Twenty thousand votes out of an estimated three million in Octant One—"

"Octant One! That's us!" Rawlins cried.

" . . . first returns give twelve thousand for Simpson against eight thousand for Queen Hortense. These results are from densely populated areas where the queen's strength was reputedly stronger. . . ."

"Now that wasn't so bad," Stracker observed encouragingly.

"Just about the way the poll indicated," Rawlins said. "No use. It's all over but the shouting."

The voice droned on. The votes piled up steadily for Simpson. Rawlins stood it for another twenty minutes. Then he jerked a finger at one of his men.

"I'm going out. When I get back, I'll write a message of congratulation to Simpson, you get Hortense to sign it, and make sure it reaches all the papers along with the usual felicitations and what not. Understand?"

The man nodded. "When will you be back?"

"Oh, hell, I don't know. Pretty soon. In a couple of hours maybe." He hurried out of the room.

Outside, the dawn was beginning to struggle through the clouds banked in the east.

*As there are so few natural boundaries on Venus, one of Simpson's first acts was to divide the planet arbitrarily into eight octants.

Rawlins' footsteps echoed across the vacant square with a hollow sound. The palace was dark except for the light at the entrance. He was suddenly filled with a vast rage toward Queen Hortense. Here he had been killing himself for the last month trying to keep her in power, and she couldn't even bother to listen to the election returns.

After several more blocks he came to a long low building with blank walls sloping smoothly from the sidewalk. He entered a door and approached the Venusian clerk, behind a glass-enclosed counter.

"Tell Miss Linda King I want to see her," he barked into the transmitter.

The clerk smiled apologetically. "I'm afraid Miss King is occupied at present. If you wish to send in a message—"

"You tell Linda King I want to see her right now or I'll bust this glass cage and you along with it!"

"Yes, sir!"

The youth hastily punched some buttons and addressed some words into the transmitter at his side.

"Miss King says she'll be out in a minute. If you'll take a seat and wait—"

"I'll wait!"

A few minutes later a door opened in the wall and Linda

rushed out. "Rawlins, what is it? I couldn't imagine you calling me."

"Oh, I couldn't stand it any longer," he blurted, seizing her in his arms. "This damned election's got me all unstrung. I had to see you. Let's go off some place where we can be by ourselves and talk."

Linda looked doubtful. "I don't know. I'm supposed to be helping with the election. Simpson will be counting on me."

"Confound it, didn't you hear me?" Rawlins cried. "I said I wanted to be alone with you."

Linda stood hesitating, her body rigid within his grasp. Then she yielded all at once. "All right. Where shall we go?"

"Let's visit that little temple the queen mentioned. It's only a short walk from here."

The wind blowing from the east was fresh against their faces. All Rawlins' fatigue had vanished in an instant. The sense of Linda's nearness exhilarated him beyond measure. The feel of her bare hand in his, the delicious sense of femininity about her, the pressure of her body, soft and yielding against his arm. . . . He rushed on breathlessly, his feet scarcely seeming to touch the ground.

After about half a mile the pavement ended, forcing them to keep to the footpath along

the edge of the highway through which they had first entered the city.

"The path should be about in here," Rawlins said, scanning the tangled shrubs and vines that encroached upon the road. "You'd never find it unless you were on the lookout for it."

"What's that over there?" Linda asked, pointing to a break in the wall of vegetation.

"That's it. It was farther from town than I thought."

They plunged into the rank growth, walking single file through the winding pathway. The vegetation was so thick that at times they were unable to see ten feet ahead. But there was no danger of losing their way, as the path although narrow was well marked. Presently they came out into an open grassy space with a low stone building in the center, surrounded by flowering shrubs and vines.

"Lovely!" Linda cried, as if enchanted. "And not another person in sight."

"All home listening to the election, probably," Rawlins said.

They strolled around the temple arm-in-arm exclaiming over the picturesque ruin with its unexpected nooks and corners and its seats half-hidden by lacy vines dripping with white and purple blossoms. The leaves stirring in the morning breeze

gave forth a fresh, lemony scent.

"Well, we seem to have the place all to ourselves," Rawlins said, after a brief tour of inspection. "Shall we sit down on one of these benches here?"

"I suppose we might as well," Linda agreed.

They sat huddled close together, breathing in the fragrance from the flowers and watching the shimmering pattern made by the yellow sunshine filtering through the trees.

"You know, if there was a nice secluded spot like this in southern California they'd never be able to let it alone," Rawlins said. "Somebody would be sure to install a hot-dog and soft-drink stand."

Linda smiled and nodded comfortably. Rawlins brushed the side of her cheek with his lips.

"And slot machines," she said. "Slot machines full of cigarettes and popcorn and candy bars."

Rawlins gave her a long lingering kiss on the lips. Linda reached up and drew him down closer beside her.

"I'd forgotten the slot machines," he mumbled. The blood was racing in his veins. He was glowing all over.

"Coke bottles, too," Linda whispered. "Don't forget the coke bottles."

"That's right. There's always coke bottles."

Linda pressed her lips hard against his. Rawlins drew her to him fiercely; his fingers were stealing over her, closing around her tighter. . . .

"Maybe we ought to be going." Linda sighed at last, smoothing down her hair. "They'll think it's funny if we're gone so long."

"They'll think it's funny anyhow," Rawlins grunted, making no effort to move.

Linda deftly applied lipstick to form a bow on her upper lip. "Wonder what Queen Hortense meant when she said we'd find why Simpson would fail in this temple?"

Rawlins yawned. "Don't know. To tell the truth I'd forgotten all about it."

"Let's see if we can find out," said Linda with sudden energy, pulling Rawlins to his feet beside her. "I don't think she'd have been talking for the fun of it."

They wandered in and out among the passageways of the temple pausing occasionally to examine some inscription or symbol carved on the walls and pillars. Many of the markings had been nearly defaced by weathering or the chemical action of the plant that overspread the gray walls. On Venus, as on the Earth, lichen was the hardiest of growing things, preparing the

way for higher forms of vegetation and clinging tenaciously to life after they were gone.

"And the meek shall inherit the Earth," Rawlins said, inspecting the greenish scale that covered the rock. "We think we're pretty good, but this lichen will outlast us all."

"Look at this," Linda said, bending over some inscriptions carved on the polished surface of a block of granite. "This looks fairly new."

"So it is," said Rawlins, running his fingers over the letters. "I'd say this was put here less than five years ago."

"Do you know what it means?"

"I'd guess these figures here are dates with some descriptive text alongside. I think they're an archaic form of Venusian type, similar to our Roman numerals."

They started reluctantly toward the narrow path that led back to the highway. The sun shining through the mist enveloped the temple in a haze of golden light.

"I'll always think of it as ours," said Linda. "Those stone pillars and the little love seats with the flowers growing over them."

Rawlins stood looking back frowning slightly. "Say, that's

funny. I hadn't noticed that before."

"What's funny?"

"See how all those old tree trunks in back of the temple are lying parallel to one another. There isn't a single grown tree among them. As if something had plowed through there and knocked them all down."

The evidence was plain enough when they could view the region as a whole from a distance.

"There's something back there partially hidden by those bushes but I can't make out what it is from here," Rawlins said, shading his eyes. "Do you see what I mean?"

"I think so. Something big and black like an animal coiled up."

"Yeah. Only it must be an awful big animal to make a coil that size. He gave her arm a squeeze. "You stay here. I'm going in there to take a look."

Before Linda could protest he was across the cleared space and into the jungle, threading his way among the shrubs and vines that covered the ground to his knees. He was forced to penetrate the tangled undergrowth to a distance of some fifty yards before he reached the dark circular object protruding from the ground. He circled around it warily, studying it from a variety

of angles, finally ending by scraping at the side of it with his pocket knife. When he rejoined Linda his face was grave.

"I think we've found something," he told her, knocking some fragments of mold from his shoes. "It looks to me like the section of a spaceship. A ship that probably landed about five years ago, judging from the height of the trees growing around it. When you scrape away the dirt from the side you can see it's metal instead of rock."

The clouds in the east were drifting over the sun turning the scene from bright morning into gray twilight. The golden mist that had enveloped the temple had faded, leaving it a dull, commonplace mass of stones eaten by the green lichen.

"Furthermore," Rawlins declared, "I've got a powerful hunch what this place was meant to be now. It's all very picturesque and charming, isn't it? A nice little hideaway for lovers. But I don't believe it was ever built for that purpose originally. I think it's a tomb. A tomb where the bodies of the men are buried who have tried to conquer this planet in the past and failed. And those figures on the stone are all that remains of them."

He gave a low chuckle. "For the last hour we've been necking

over the graves of our companions of the past."

They found the highway singularly deserted for such a late hour. The few travellers abroad eyed them suspiciously and hurried on. Rawlins was oppressed by an overpowering sense of longing and homesickness for Earth. Lately he had come to regard Venus almost as home, a place in many respects not so different from the land where he had grown up as a boy. Now he felt himself a stranger in a strange land. Everything inspired him with dread—the ever-present clouds, the lingering night and day, the three volcanoes smoldering on the horizon. As Stracker said, how much did they really know about the Venusians? They resembled human beings and in many ways they behaved like human beings. But were they? Was there any real kinship between them?

At the entrance to Simpson's headquarters they kissed and parted with scarcely a word spoken. How different their meeting had been a scant hour before, Rawlins thought. Then, they had been riding on the crest of the wave. Now they were down in the depths. All dead inside.

He strode down the hall to his office, uncomfortably aware that he had been gone an inordinate

length of time. Oh, well, what the hell? He set his lips in a firm line and pushed open the door.

The room was a shambles. There was paper all over the floor. The tables and desks were littered with cigarette stubs and coffee cups. Through the blue haze men and women could be discerned shouting at each other above the blast of words issuing from the television set. There was a hush as Rawlins entered. He felt himself shrinking under Stracker's inquiring gaze.

"Well, where have you been keeping yourself?"

"I just stepped out for a few minutes," Rawlins retorted. "Got any objections?"

"Not in the least. Only it's too bad you missed the fireworks is all."

Rawlins heart gave a leap.

"Fireworks. What fireworks?" He knew he mustn't hope but he couldn't stop himself. Couldn't suppress the fierce yearning that surged up within him.

"You remember how Simpson looked like a dead cinch for first there at the start?" Stracker chuckled. "Well, it went on that way for about half an hour after you left. Then Hortense began to gain. Before she'd finished she'd taken the whole southern hemisphere and was running even in Octants One and Three.

Never known anything so thrilling in my life."

A violent trembling seized Rawlins that he was unable to control. "Don't tell me . . . she won?"

The doctor shook his head regretfully. "No, she didn't win. But she certainly upset the dope bucket. Simpson came in ahead by less than two per cent."

VIII

RAWLINS sat down a bit unsteadily. "I guess I'm a hell of a prognosticator," he said.

"It's ridiculous to think you can understand these people overnight," Stracker said. "When we can't understand ourselves yet."

"Yeah." Rawlins stretched out in the chair. He felt exhausted.

Stracker brought him a cup of water from the cooler. Rawlins took it gratefully.

"Another thing I don't like about this planet is the water," said Rawlins, sipping the liquid thoughtfully. "If I drink more than about a teaspoonful at a time it makes me sick."

"That's right. You were one of those that folded up at the Festival of Fire, weren't you?"

"I sure was. Never been so sick in my life."

"Maybe you were never meant to be an arsenicophagist then."

"No I guess not—whatever it is."

"An arsenic eater. A person who takes arsenic habitually."

Rawlins set down the cup with a jerk. "You mean this water's got arsenic in it?"

The doctor grinned reassuringly.

"You develop a tolerance to it after awhile. Besides, arsenic's supposed to improve your looks. Makes your hair nice and lustrous. Gives you a pretty pink complexion."

"Why in hell doesn't Simpson have the water distilled?"

The doctor shrugged. "Apparently our chemistry department is too busy turning out cosmetics to bother with such non-essential activities. To be perfectly frank, I don't know for a fact that the water does contain arsenic, but the symptoms strongly suggest such a poison. In any case, it's probably only a trace."

Now that the election was finally over Rawlins could see that his staff was as dead beat as himself. What a thoroughly good bunch they were, he thought. How faithfully they had labored for what they must have known in their hearts was a hopeless cause. And how few of them there were, when you came to think of it. After more than a year on Venus they were still virtually isolated. For the first

time it struck him as very strange. One of the few facts that had stuck in his head from a course in anthropology was the statement that no two races, no matter how dissimilar, had ever lived in proximity without there being some intermingling between them. Yet he was certain that no one there in the room had mated with a Venusian.

He was pondering over the implications of this discovery when Simpson came in followed by the major members of his committee. If they felt victorious they failed to show it. Only Simpson had made an effort to maintain appearances. He looked tired but spruce, like a man who had tried to freshen up after an all-night poker party.

The two groups eyed each other wanly. Rawlins cleared the debris from a couple of chairs.

"Greetings. Sit down. Congratulations. Didn't expect you over quite so soon. We were just sitting here feeling sorry for ourselves."

"I saw no point in prolonging the agony," Simpson said, with a bleak smile. "The split over the election was purely artificial. We still constitute one force bound together by the same mutual aims and interests. Co-operation. Spiritual welfare. Moral integrity. Henceforth let those be our watchwords."

He took a slip of paper from his inside coat pocket and adjusted his bifocals.

"A message came a few minutes ago which I thought you might like to hear. It is from Ballard Kingsley, our representative on Earth. He says:

Dear Friends—

We at home rejoice in your victory and pledge again our faith in the success of the great enterprise upon which you are engaged. Be assured that we are as one with you in our hearts and thoughts."

Simpson replaced the message in his coat pocket along with his bifocals. For a moment he stood quietly contemplating the top of the desk as if in deep meditation. At length he reached down and moved a glass of water two inches to the right.

"While the results of the election were coming in I was thinking," he said. He paused briefly waiting for the effect of this announcement to sink in.

"What was I thinking? I was thinking that the time had come for a great summing up. A visible demonstration of all we have tried to do for the people here. An exhibition that would show them in a vivid dramatic form how their lives have been enriched by the fruits of our

bounty. In other words, how far they've come since we landed."

He moved the glass of water two inches back to its original position.

"And so I've decided that we're going to have an interplanetary exposition. An exposition the likes of which nobody on Earth or Venus has ever dreamed before. And we're going after the women—hard. One of the big things I've planned is the Mile of Beauty. A place where a woman can go in a *hausfrau* at one end and come out a glamor girl at the other. Can't you just see the excitement a thing like that'll stir up? Can't you see a woman's husband, and the neighbors, standing around the exit waiting for her to come out? Why, it'll be the greatest thing since they invented twin beds."

He stopped and looked around the room expectantly. Nobody moved. Nobody spoke.

"Well . . . anybody got any ideas?"

There was an uneasy silence. Somebody coughed in the back of the room.

"It'll have to be plenty good, J.D. That's all I've got to say. The women are beginning to drift back to their old ways already. They're only interested till the novelty wears off. You don't get any customer loyalty in this place."

"All right, it will be good then," Simpson retorted. "It's our job to make it good. And right now's the time to start. The election's over. Forget it. This exposition's the thing now. I want the publicity started on it immediately."

The men and women remained slumped in their chairs. An apathy seemed to weigh them down, which even Simpson was unable to dispel.

"I'd suggest we take a little time out," Stracker interposed. "We're exhausted from this campaign. A short rest would be good for us all."

"Rest!" There was acid in Simpson's voice. "Fine. Anybody wants a rest go ahead and take it. I've got work to do."

He turned on his heel and strode over to where Rawlins was leaning against the filing cabinet.

"That was a great fight you put up, boy," he cried, seizing Rawlins' hand and pumping it vigorously. "Brilliant campaign. Enjoyed every minute of it."

Rawlins shook hands limply. "Nobody was more surprised than I at the way it turned out. I never thought we had a chance."

"Any idea what went wrong?"

"No, I honestly haven't. I want you to understand I'm not offering any alibis. If I had to

do it all over again I'd do it exactly the same way. If you're dissatisfied with the results I'll be glad to step out anytime."

"Now who said anything about stepping out? Besides you can't. Got too much work lined up for you. Maybe this business of polling people is a lot of hooey. I've always said I'd trust my hunches against a bunch of figures any day."

He beckoned to Linda. "I want to get your reaction to this Mile of Beauty idea. Give Hestor Hildegarde a buzz. We'll meet over in my office and start laying it out. Rawlins, you better come along. I'll be right with you soon as I have a word with one of the boys."

Linda joined Rawlins by the filing cabinet.

"He's wonderful, isn't he?" she whispered, unable to keep the admiration from her voice. "You'd never guess he's been without sleep for thirty-six hours, would you?"

Rawlins cast a sidelong glance in Simpson's direction. "Oh, I don't know. He looks kind of peaked to me."

Simpson came back, rubbing his hands briskly. "Now. Shall we be on our way?"

He stopped, arrested by a sharp rattling series of reports from outside. There was a momentary silence. Then more reports, fol-

lowed by screams and a confusion of cries.

"Goodness. What was that?" Linda gasped.

Rawlins shook his head listening intently. There came another series of reports followed by more cries. The character of the sound was unmistakable now.

The room came to life in an instant. The Earthmen were on their feet, clustering around Simpson.

"That sounded like rifle fire."

"It sure did."

"But who on earth—"

"Hey! Somebody's coming down the hall!"

A man flung open the door. He stood on the threshold, gasping for breath, staring at them wildly. His coat and shirt were torn and bloodstained, and one arm hung limply. He staggered over toward Simpson.

"We're attacked," he gasped. "They broke into the cosmetics plant. We never had a chance."

Simpson eyed him sharply. "Who do you mean by 'they'?"

"I don't know. All I know is that a little while ago we heard some high-thrust rockets coming in. There weren't any flights scheduled, but we were so busy talking about the election we didn't pay much attention."

He stopped gulping for breath.

"Next thing we knew here a bunch of these fellows came

barging in and told us they were taking over. When we told them to get the hell out they conked a couple of us and tied up the rest. There's wasn't anything we could do. They were armed and we weren't. I managed to sneak out through the packaging room and tore over here fast as I could. I'd have made it quicker but one of 'em took a shot at me as I was crossing the square."

He felt of his arm gingerly.

"You mean they were men like us?" said Simpson. "Men from the Earth?"

"I don't know. I guess so. That's the way they looked to me."

All eyes were on Simpson. He stood nervously clasping and unclasping his hands. Then he jammed his hat on his head. "Come on. We'll settle this thing right now."

They headed automatically for the square with Simpson in the lead. The excitement acted on him like a tonic. His eyes were alive, and there was new elasticity in his step.

"Rawlins, you know the queen better than any of us. D'you think she could be behind a thing like this?"

"Not a chance. It's not in the least like her."

"I wonder. She's a smart woman. I'm afraid I've always

underestimated her. It never pays to underestimate a woman."

Rawlins was about to reply that that was the same conclusion he had reached when a boy dashed past almost knocking them down.

"Hey, what's the rush?" Rawlins shouted. "What goes on here?"

The boy turned impatiently. "There's another invasion on. We want to see what this bunch has got." He ran on down the street.

For the first time Simpson hesitated as if uncertain how to proceed.

"We'll go see Queen Hortense first. Find out what the situation is there." He strode rapidly on ahead.

A score of men in gray uniforms with rifles under their arms were lounging in the center of the square. They stiffened to attention as Simpson and the others entered. One of them detached himself from the group.

"Just a minute there," he called. "Not so fast if you don't mind."

Simpson paused at the entrance of the palace. There was anger as well as bewilderment in his eyes. "They're from Earth all right. Now what are they doing here? And who do they think they are?"

Rawlins caught his arm. "That guy in front looks kind of familiar to me. By god, if I don't

think it is. It's Ballard Kingsley—or else his twin brother."

"You're right." Rawlins could feel Simpson trembling under his hand. "The devil! The dirty double-crossing devil! That message—"

"Take it easy," Rawlins cautioned. "They're armed and we haven't so much as a jack-knife between us. Better try to stall them for awhile."

But Simpson thrust him impatiently aside. With clenched fists he hurled himself on the man in gray.

"Back!" Rawlins shouted. "Simpson, back."

Simpson had reached the leader and was clawing at his throat.

"Oh, lord," Rawlins breathed, "here we go again."

Along with the others he rushed to the aid of his chief.

IX

THE setting sun bathed the square in a flood of amber light. The people stood like statues, with one arm raised in salute to the splendor that was sinking into the underworld. From their throats rose the song of the Festival of Fire, telling of dimly remembered sorrows in ages past, sad with that sweet sadness that lies halfway between pleasure and pain. Now it struck a deeper note as Queen Hor-

tense, followed by her maidens, ascended the steps to the altar.

"The moon!" Linda cried. "I just saw it between the clouds. The little new moon."

Rawlins glimpsed a star riding clear and serene above a bank of cloud. He watched it for a moment then turned back to the throng below. Queen Hortense tall and stately in her ceremonial robes stood before the altar waiting to receive the torch whose breath was like the touch of life.

"There it goes," he said, as the torch flashed through the air.

A great roar rose from the throng as the flames leaped up. The people laughed and shouted as joyously as children on a holiday.

"Well, it's the same old routine," Rawlins observed. "Everything just like the last time, far as I can see."

"Only we're different," Linda said, brushing the hair from her face. Her eyes were dull except when they caught the gleam from the fire.

Rawlins drew her over beside him. Watching the Venusians a great sense of peace descended upon him. A sense of peace mingled with a faint nostalgia for all that had gone before.

"Why, honey, what's the matter? Now don't feel bad again."

He tried to turn her face around but she kept it stubbornly averted.

"I feel so lost," she sobbed. "I'd been with Simpson so long I can't get used to being without him any more."

Rawlins patted her shoulder reassuringly.

"What do you suppose will become of us now?" she asked.

"Well, we can take our choice. We can stay here and keep on working or take the next ship back to Earth. Kingsley has given us three days to make up our mind."

"I'd never work for Kingsley. That cold-blooded murderer."

"Now, we've gone over all that before. I've explained to you it was bound to come sooner or later. Simpson had been the top man on Earth so long we'd got to take him as a matter of course. As soon as he pulled out the inevitable occurred. Kingsley went to work, wangled his men into key positions, and then struck. Curious thing was that Simpson never suspected anything. Old boy had gotten careless, I guess."

Now the color had faded from the sunset sky leaving it a flat uniform gray. Only a faint patch of red glowed over the three volcanoes on the horizon.

"Certainly Simpson secured a

greater domination over more people's minds than any man before him," Rawlins mused, thinking out loud to himself. "But then, he had more advantages than those before him. Through newspapers and magazines and motion pictures and television he could multiply his thought a millionfold. And the people liked to have him do their thinking for them. He made life seem so simple and reasonable that they believed all the time they were figuring things out for themselves. And a man is never so happy as when he knows exactly what he should think and has a lot of people who agree with him."

"You never did like him," Linda protested bitterly. "Why was Simpson so bad? What did he ever do to you?"

"From certain remarks of yours I gathered you didn't altogether approve of Simpson yourself."

"I know," Linda said, looking away. "But honestly, I did like him in lots of ways. It was just once in awhile when I got tired and discouraged."

Rawlins drew Linda's head down against his shoulder.

"Mention the word *superman* and immediately we picture a brilliant genius with a bulging chest and the glance of Jove. But people don't appreciate a guy

like that. They can't understand him and so they distrust him instinctively. It never occurred to any of us that the superman who could most easily dominate us would be an ordinary little fellow whose only claim to distinction would be in his uncanny ability to glorify our own commonplace ideas. In that sense I think Simpson was a genius—a superman. He was a master of mediocrity."

"Just the same I think he did a lot of good."

"Well, I'm not saying he didn't. A man could get along first-rate in Simpson's world as long as he conformed to the crowd. But there was no room for the fellow who was born with six fingers. For the man who couldn't conform. It was a system that worked beautifully for people like us on the Earth. But it was doomed to failure on Venus, where the people aren't like us at all."

"But they *seem* like us."

"I know. That was where we got fooled. Simpson was so busy trying to control the people by turning out lipstick and cold-cream and other gadgets to please them that he never got around to probing very deep beneath the surface. But from samples that went back to Earth Ballard Kingsley got suspicious immediately. He found that

everything wasn't what it appeared on the surface. Now you can bet he'll never try to woo the Venusians as Simpson did. It was as hopeless as trying to domesticate the Argentina ant."

"But I still don't understand why the Venusians are so different from ourselves," Linda declared.

"Remember there are a lot of things we have never understood about Venus," Rawlins told her. "We've never been able to understand why a planet so similar to the Earth in so many ways should apparently have developed along such different lines. Astronomers have always had a hard time trying to make Venus fit into a theory of evolution along with the other terrestrial planets. Now Kingsley's work makes it clear for the first time. Although it should have been plain enough if we'd had our eyes half way open."

Linda laughed. "Mine must have been closed up tight I guess."

"Did it ever occur to you as odd that nobody in our outfit ever fell for any of the Venusian women?" Rawlins asked.

"It did strike me as rather odd," Linda confessed. "I couldn't help wondering sometimes what was the matter with the men. Some of the Venusian

women were quite good looking, too."

"Well, suppose we put the question the other way around. Did you ever feel attracted toward any of the Venusian men?"

"Good heavens, no!"

"You see—something was wrong," Rawlins told her. "The good old urge was lacking. Now you take Queen Hortense . . . she's far and away the best looking woman I ever saw—"

He checked himself abruptly. "Oh, well, why deny it? You know the queen's a gorgeous looker if there ever was one. Yet for some reason I never could go for her. She never had the slightest sex appeal for me."

Linda was looking very hard at the crowd below. "There were times when I wasn't so sure."

"Well, naturally I couldn't help staring at her. But honestly, honey, that was as far as it ever went. So far as I was concerned she might as well have been a statue or a beautifully cut jewel.

"Now Stracker says it isn't so peculiar after all. It's all just a matter of a few neutrons apparently. *Chemically* we're the same as the Venusians but *physically* we're different. For instance, if you were to analyze the carbon in us and the carbon in a Venusian you'd find they're not the

same. The carbon in our bodies is 99 per cent C¹² and only 1 per cent C¹³. But in a Venusian about a third of the carbon is the rare C¹³ variety.

"You mean the Venusians are sort of stand-ins for us?" Linda said. "Isotope people?"

"Something like that. At any rate, the abundance of the isotopes on Venus and the Earth is entirely different. Carbon isn't the only element that's abnormal. There's nitrogen and oxygen and titanium, too. And hydrogen! You've no idea how much deuterium there is around this planet.

"That was what knocked me out at the first Festival of Fire. I got too big a dose of heavy water. It killed Jim and Betsy, too. Stracker thought it was arsenic at first. Naturally he never thought of heavy water."

"If we'd only known," Linda said. "Everything might have been so different. Simpson might still be alive. Still in power."

Rawlins shook his head.

"I doubt it. Not for long at least. Remember the remains of that spaceship we found by the temple? Undoubtedly the Venusians have been invaded many times before. Their planet is a rich prize that others could hardly have overlooked in the past. But the Venusians know,

in some subtle way that they probably don't understand themselves, that they are different from the other creatures of the solar system and that, given sufficient time, they will always emerge victorious."

"But why?" Linda cried. "Why do they have these strange atoms in their bodies?"

"It is a peculiar thing that regardless of where we turn our telescopes on the universe we find the same elements in almost exactly the same proportions. But notice that I said 'almost.' For here and there we find stars of the kind astronomers call Type R in which the abundance of the carbon isotopes is entirely different from that of the stars

around them. Stars in which the abundance of C¹³ is as high as it is on Venus.

"Perhaps a billion or two years ago such a star came whirling past us and left a part of itself to become a stepchild of the sun's. Later this planet came to be known as Venus. And so the people who developed on Venus were always destined to remain strangers to the others. People alien and isolated. And nobody will ever be able to understand them, no matter how hard they try."

Linda crept closer within the sheltering protection of Rawlins' arms.

They were together, yet so very much alone, too.

SURVEY

By JOHN JAKES



TELL left the phone booth, having carefully folded the list of names and inserted it into the inner pocket of his overcoat. He adjusted the tall-crowned black fedora on his head as his eyes flicked over the noisy interior of the brilliantly lit drug store. He had been in the city eight days, among the peculiar people, and he had heretofore

prided himself on his powers of adjustment. Most of the people he passed on the sidewalks or in bus aisles gave him blank, dull-witted stares, their minds turned inward. A few, however, would glance perceptively as they passed, noticing Tell's all too prominent cheekbones. He made it a habit to keep his lids lowered so that they could not see

his eyes. The ones who noticed, they had to be watched for, Tell knew, since their brains were constantly alive and alert.

However, after the completion of the migration, he would have nothing to fear from them.

The drugstore, he saw, contained no Thinkers. A row of girls hunched over their coffee cups. Tell glanced at the clock over the door, his mind requiring a second to make the adjustment to a foreign numeral scheme. The noon hour. Resolutely then Tell left the drug store and proceeded along the abysmally dirty sidewalk toward the green sign marking a bus stop. The skyscrapers, as they were called, blotted out the sky and seemed to act as generators of filth. Tell longed for his home, sunny, wind-swept, on a sparkling red plateau. Then he recalled sadly that neither he nor any one else of his race would enjoy the comforts of that home after the migration. The Law had ordained a migration after each period of three—no—four thousand years as these creatures reckoned time. Well, they would mold this planet to fit their tastes, too.

Tell stood by the bus stop, noting a comrade passing on the opposite side of the street, chin sunk deeply into the collar of an

overcoat similar to Tell's. Snow began to drift down again, wet, gray and unfriendly. Tell pulled his hat low as the bus snuffled toward him through traffic. It was comforting for Tell to think of the hundreds and hundreds of his companions laboring in this particular city exactly as he labored. Tell laughed silently as he recalled numerous incidents bearing out the theories of his Instructor, years ago before Tell had been ready to undertake his mission. The Instructor had pointed out that Tell and his companions would be forced to be better citizens of this world than those native-born, since the most important task of this special corps of millions, aside from their primary function, would be to avoid breaking any of the laws of these people. Mild-mannered and unassuming, Tell and his companions would hardly ever be bothered unless one of them committed some sort of offense. As far as Tell knew, no offense had yet been committed anywhere in the world by his companions. The inhabitants themselves violated all laws, including the smallest like the instructions of the colored lights at street crossings, so long as they were not apprehended. If that happened, Tell expected that it would only be a short time before they re-

sumed similar activities once more.

Tell boarded the bus, calmly bearing the vituperations of a fat woman who insisted he had shoved in ahead of her. Snow fell harder now, renewing the supply that had only begun to vanish from the sidewalks and gutters. The bus careened forward through traffic. Tell stood, hand in strap, listening carefully to the driver as he called out the stops. At last Tell moved to the exit when the announcement came, "Soames Avenue." *Soames Avenue*. The name at the top of Tell's list.

Tell felt relieved that no one else alighted from the bus at Soames Avenue. He stared up the street, wet snowflakes brushing against his cheeks with a foreign feel. Far in the distance he could see the end of the street, blocked by railroad tracks. He sighed softly and drew the list from his coat. The first home on his left, numbered on his list to correspond with the street numerals, was large and old-fashioned, pointed roof thrusting at the dull winter sky. Tell marched up the long flight of cement steps and rang the bell. He studied the list a moment longer, then thrust it deep into his coat again as he drew out a small notebook.

A figure appeared behind the frosted glass door. Tell drew his

hat on more tightly, reminding himself an instant later that the gesture was dangerous and uncalled for. The door opened to reveal a thin, seedy man of forty, with limp brown hair pasted over his forehead. He peered at Tell through steel-rimmed spectacles. Smoke curled up through a stub of a cigarette held in yellowed fingers. The man wore a faded red bathrobe.

"Yes?" the man said suspiciously.

Tell said in perfectly articulated tones, "You are Mr. Amos Humphrey?"

"That's right."

"My name is Rogers, sir. I am conducting a survey for United Advertising Enterprises." Tell mentioned a city several hundreds of miles away as the place where the office was located. "I have credentials from the Chamber of Commerce and the Better Business Bureau giving me permission to canvass homes, sir, and I wondered if you'd mind letting me ask you a few questions. Each individual opinion is highly valued."

Tell presented the carefully forged credentials, aware of the man's pleased smile after the last flattering sentence. "Why sure, come on in." The man held the door wide. Tell thanked him politely and stepped into the house. First of all he noted the

large television set, the layers of sheet music on the piano and a number of glaze-covered movie magazines on a blond coffee table. The table looked expensive, but out of place among the other, ancient dark-wooded pieces ranged about the room. Tell leaned over and leafed through the magazines. "Do you read these regularly, sir?"

"I don't," Humphrey said. "My wife and daughter do. I look 'em over once in awhile." The man chuckled self-consciously. "I kind of like to see what the stars are doing, you know." The chuckle continued for a moment.

"I understand perfectly, sir," Tell replied. "May I ask your occupation?"

"Plumber," Humphrey replied. "Though I ain't been working much lately. The flu's got me down a little."

Tell scribbled meaningless phrases in his notebook, careful that Humphrey could not see him. "Now I'd like to ask you some questions, sir. Please give me a frank answer. This data will be kept confidential, but it's vitally necessary that we have it. Ready?"

"Sure," Humphrey said with a slack grin. He eased himself into a chair as Tell did the same.

"If an advertised product was offered to you," Tell asked, "and

you knew nothing of the product's value, only that the word 'science' was used in the advertising as a claim to its worth, would you tend to regard the product as worth buying? Yes or no?"

Humphrey licked his lips. "Could you let me have that again?"

Tell repeated the question. "You understand what I mean," Tell added. "If the advertising said, *Science has proved it...*" He lifted one hand in a gesture. "And so on."

"Why," Humphrey said slowly, "I guess I'd buy it if scientists said it was okay."

"Fine. Now let me ask you this. Which product would you buy, provided both were identical, only advertised under different names? One which displayed a picture of a girl in a sweater next to the product or one which did not?"

"That's easy," Humphrey smirked obscenely. "The one in the sweater. Provided she was stacked."

Tell asked a number of other questions pertaining to sex, religion and politics, at the end of which time he thanked Amos Humphrey and left the house. Humphrey had told him that his wife and daughter were out. Tell regretted that, since he liked to question each person individ-

ually, but when time or circumstances did not permit, one family member had to be taken as an index to the rest. The snow had abated somewhat, and Tell drew out his list. Carefully beside the name and address of Amos Humphrey he inscribed the word, *Non-thinker*.

He proceeded to the next house, then crossed the street, asking his questions, working his way toward the railroad tracks as the afternoon progressed. He was appalled to find that every person on his list thus far had been a Non-thinker. Certainly the Instructors had prepared him for much greater opposition. Tell stood on the street corner two blocks from the railroad tracks studying the next group of names on his list. *Jack Bennet, Rhea Bennet, Timmy Bennet*. Tell studied their house, another old and large structure veiled in gathering darkness.

Tell first felt the sharp sting of something biting his cheek. Then he whirled to stare down the cross street at the little boy in red stocking cap, blue jeans and jacket who had heaved the snowball. The boy thumbed his nose derisively and screeched, "Yaaaab!" He ran in the opposite direction. Tell bent down to examine the snowball which had fallen apart at his feet. In the center was a sharply pointed

stone. Tell felt wild panic as a drop of his yellow blood fell to the snow and shone colorfully for a moment. He pressed a hand to his cheek. How large was the wound? He needed something to cover it, or else he would be in grave danger. He wanted to return to the cubby hole in the rooming house where he made his temporary home, but he knew he had to keep on with the survey. Today was his last day, and all data had to be in by midnight. Every inch of this city, as well as all other cities, had to be covered. What to do?

Tell tore his handkerchief from his pocket and pressed it to the wound. He crossed the street quickly and walked up the front steps of the Bennet home, keeping the handkerchief tight to his cheek. He would have to be careful, very careful. But he calmed himself, realizing that in that way he could best carry out his double objective. He twisted the old-fashioned bell, heard it ring in the far distances of the house. A woman opened the door a few moments later, a slim attractive young red-head, wearing a house dress that could not conceal her figure, and a flour-smudged plastic apron. Her greenish eyes studied him with concern.

"Pardon me, madam," Tell burst out, "but I'm here making

a survey. A young boy hit me with a snowball, there was a rock in it, and I'm afraid my face is cut badly. Could you—?"

"Come in, come in," the young woman said warmly. Tell stepped into the tastefully decorated front hall. "My name's Rhea Bennet. Come out to the kitchen and I'll fix that cut for you."

"No, please," Tell said hastily. "I mean, I can fix it for myself. No need for you to bother. If you'd only show me the bathroom . . ."

"All right," Rhea Bennet replied pleasantly. "You say you're making a survey?"

"That's right," Tell replied, pressing the handkerchief fiercely against his face. He was hardly aware of what he was saying as he thought of yellow blood seeping inexorably, dangerously through the cloth. But at last Rhea Bennet gestured him into a blue-tiled room and he closed the door behind him. With a gasp of relief he took the handkerchief away. The blood had not soaked through. In the medicine cabinet he found gauze and adhesive tape. He affixed a large patch to his cheek, taping it in place and studied his image carefully. No, it looked all right now. His anger at the small boy burned high for a moment, and he found himself wishing ex-

termination upon the imp. Then he calmed himself as he realized that if all citizens of this planet had such childish instincts his job would not be necessary.

He found Rhea Bennet in the kitchen. "Sit down," she said warmly, indicating the cheery kitchen table. "I've fixed you some coffee. This is terrible weather to be tramping around. Am I going to be surveyed?" She set down a cup of steaming coffee. The odor revolted Tell but he felt gratitude nevertheless. He took a sip of the coffee and sighed, smacking his lips in a perfect imitation of enjoyment.

"Yes, you're going to be surveyed," he said. "You've no idea how much I appreciate your helping me like this."

"It was nothing," she replied, returning to a pot bubbling on the stove.

"Believe me, it was!" Tell declared fervently, thinking of the dangers involved, had he not checked the wound's flow.

"I'm sorry my husband isn't home," Rhea Bennet said over her shoulder. "He'd love to be surveyed. They make him mad, advertising polls and the like."

"Oh?" Tell replied with soft surprise. "What does your husband do?"

"He's a plumber," Rhea Bennet replied. "My boy Timmy's

visiting his grandmother this afternoon."

"A . . . plumber," Tell said with a vague feeling of emptiness. He wished suddenly he could leave this house and this woman. He decided he had better get to the business of his survey immediately. He asked his first question.

Rhea Bennet whirled, laughing. "Jack would love this. He'd stamp up and down and puff out his cheeks and swear like anything." She gave an imitation of Jack Bennet in anger that made Tell laugh with genuine humor. "One of Jack's pet complaints is advertising, and the way science is almost synonymous with God. No, I'm afraid Jack wouldn't buy *anything* just because some young brat with a toothpaste smile and a windsor knot showed a couple of graphs or charts and mumbled something about scientific laboratories. Jack'd throw a brick at the television or the radio, more than likely."

"Well," Tell said, licking his lips. "That's very interesting." He licked his lips, staring helplessly at the scribbled note-book page. He put his second question to her.

"Jack hates the female breast on a billboard almost as much as he does the way they use science." Rhea Bennet smiled at him. "No, I'm afraid we're not

exactly the ad man's best prospect."

"I can see that," Tell said softly, almost to himself. He felt discouraged, but he ran through the rest of the questions. To each one Rhea Bennet answered forcefully, in terms of what her husband thought, but it was only too clear to Tell that she agreed with him. When he had finished his questioning he retreated hastily to the front door. He fumbled awkwardly with his note-book, aware of the glance of the big-chested Jack Bennet from the picture frame on the mantel. Jack Bennet had a hard jaw and an uncompromising eye.

Tell thanked Mrs. Bennet again as she opened the door for him. "I talked to another plumber this afternoon," Tell blurted out suddenly. "He . . . had some quite different ideas."

Rhea Bennet frowned. "Amos Humphrey? Down by the boulevard?" Tell nodded. "He's a bad plumber," Rhea Bennet said with determination, "and what's more, he's a narrow-minded, hypocritical man."

"Is that your . . . private opinion?" Tell said hopefully.

"Private and public. Jack's told him to his face."

"Oh. Well. Thank you," Tell stared disconsolately at his note-book as he walked off the porch into the snow that swirled with

fresh vigor. The door closed behind him. He called himself seven kinds of fool for allowing personal sympathy to enter in, and yet the woman had been kind to him, gracious and generous. With regret he drew out his list. He hesitated a moment, and then with some bitterness he wrote *Thinker* beside the name of Jack Bennet. Turning his face toward the railroad tracks, he trudged on through the snow gloom, having no taste for his task now but aware that it had to be finished.

Two more hours brought the completion of his survey. He replaced the list in his overcoat and walked slowly up to the boulevard. There he boarded a bus that cartied him into the downtown district of the city. He was tired and lonely, and his feet felt leaden on the wet pavement. He walked along until he found a deserted drug store with a row of phone booths far in the back. Pulling his hat low he entered the store and made straight for the furthest booth. There he closed the door, peering out beyond a magazine rack to see the nearest person, a clerk, leaning idly on a counter some fifteen yards away. Tell was glad to be finished with the job. What he had had to do at the Bennets' was enough to sour a person completely. That was the pitiable

part, that thoughtfulness and consideration often came together . . . Still, he realized that he, one unit in the great migration, was helpless.

Wearily he reached into his trousers for a dime. He lifted the receiver, casting a wary eye to see that the clerk had not moved. He dropped the dime in the coin slot and when he heard the tone, he dialed eighteen times. In a moment he was in whispered communication with the central control ship, three hundred miles in the sky.

The conquest of the planet called Earth was accomplished in three days. On the first day, the invaders announced themselves. On the second day they destroyed the six highest mountain peaks in the world as a demonstration of their power. On the third day the great gray ships began to land, bringing the exterminator corps. It had been made quite clear in the first announcement that The Law of the invaders made migration mandatory, and laid down also the terms of occupation. An Earthman prone to resist had no chance. The invaders, pleasant-eyed, benevolent in attitude and quite calm, were everywhere, millions of them, billions and hundreds of billions. But they had complete plans for space

utilization of the planet to facilitate handling their large population, as well as plans for utilizing the satellite of the Earth. Their technology, it became pitifully apparent to Earthmen, was advanced some thousand or two thousand years beyond that of the invaded planet.

Tell and his companion agents had greeted the first ships when they landed all over the globe. Tell had been systematically weeding out the Thinkers from the area he had canvassed. Exterminator trucks crawled like gray beetles over every strip of negotiable highway in the world. Tell had been working for two days and nights, fretfully, because the worst task lay at the end. Tell, riding beside his assistant who drove, saw Soames Avenue swing around before him as the truck pulled up before the armed guard posted at the street's entrance. The guard made the sign of respect as Tell leaned out the window.

"Jack Bennet, Rhea Bennet, Timmy Bennet, Thinkers," the guard recited from a clip board. "They are under guard." Tell returned the sign of respect and gestured his assistant on.

"I'm not satisfied," Tell complained.

"Tell," the assistant who was young, recently indoctrinated and enthusiastic, complained,

"you know perfectly well that The Law forces us to migrate, and forces us to subjugate the colonized peoples by exterminating those clever enough to give us opposition. We want things to be peaceful. Only if we have slaves can we have peace. You know it's best in the long run. Surely you can't have the interest of these Earthmen above that of your own people."

"No," Tell sighed, "that's the sad part of it. I know something is amiss, but I am a man of my people, and I would not presume to contradict The Law. Perhaps I would be happier if I were a slave too."

"Nonsense," the assistant replied. He braked the truck before the Bennet household. An armed guard reported that the three members of the family were inside. Tell felt relieved. He could not face them. The assistant took charge when Tell waved to him. Tell sat slumped in the seat as the side of the truck opened and the colorless rays radiated outward. The house disappeared abruptly, leaving the ground covered with a thin fragile coating of ash. Well, thought Tell, we'll have no opposition from the Bennets. When we move on again, perhaps this world will develop Thinkers once more . . .

The assistant turned the truck

around. As they neared the boulevard, Tell saw a man he recognized sitting dully on the curb, watching them drive past. Tell ordered the truck to a halt. Humphrey. Yes, Amos Humphrey. Savagely Tell thumbed the control that opened the truck side. Humphrey disappeared, a dull uncomprehending glow in his eyes. The assistant seemed stupefied. "But . . . but he was no . . ."

"Never mind," Tell snapped. "I am your superior. Forget this."

"Yes, sir," the assistant replied submissively.

"Drive on," Tell waved. He settled lower into the seat. Well, it was poor payment for the kind lady who had helped him. Poor and completely inadequate. But he knew with his mind that he could do little else. The truck swung into the boulevard, and when they reached the downtown the street was jammed from curb to curb by a fleet of similar trucks. Over the incredibly dirty skyscrapers huge gray ships lowered. Tell would have to greet his wife and children soon. They

would be coming to the city. He caught the assistant giving him a peculiar stare. "Pay attention to your driving," Tell snapped.

I've lived too long on this planet without my fellows around me, Tell thought wildly. I've got to return to my own thought system. Even as he thought, he knew it was no use. The experience on Soames Avenue had definitely altered his personality. He could never forget it. His people would not want him in his mental condition. It would be unfair to them. What can I do anyway? he thought wildly. They'll find out, the assistant will report me and they'll psycho-examine me and then I'll be finished. Tell stared helplessly out the truck window, at the ranks of other trucks driving along beside in orderly rows. He felt cheated, unlucky, hopelessly trapped.

"Don't get any ideas about reporting me for what I did," Tell burst out to the assistant.

The assistant said nothing.

At the first opportunity, Tell thought frantically, I will have to kill myself. . . .

WHO YOU CALLIN' A MONSTER?

By TOM BEACH



IT WAS, of course, love at first sight.

There were, of course, problems.

That in the case of Mike de Forrest the problems were caused by an assortment of monsters can also be regarded as a matter of

course. Mike, after all, was the creator of *Enormo*. And *Enormo's* job was vanquishing monsters.

In this he was aided by a Police Captain named McMuck, who was always wrong, and by a fantastically beautiful fiancee

named Dinah, who was always willing. *Enormo*, of course, was always several things at the same time: superbly muscled, of stunning intelligence, handsome beyond the wildest Dream of the most imaginative Maiden, and invulnerable—even to the charms of Dinah.

However, in the process of proving these attributes to a wondering throng of comic-strip readers, *Enormo* used up a remarkably large quantity of villains. Regular as clockwork, he vanquished one villain in every six-week period. And the sixth week was just about up.

It became incumbent upon Mike to invent a new villain, a villain more horrible than *The Nose*, *The Eyes*, *The Mouth* or *The Faceless*, which *Enormo* had already disposed of. And his imagination had gone dead.

With a sigh he discarded his latest idea, *The Bullet*, a man with a bullet-shaped head, as being too similar to *The Point*, a character whose skull had been flat, and whose chin came to a point. He stared at a blank scratch-pad and sighed again.

It was no soap. There had been times, before *The Nose*, when he had decided that he had used every possible variation—but then *The Nose* had come into his head and given him an entirely new slant that had re-

sulted in a steady stream of monsters. But this time it looked as if he were below the bottom of the barrel. He had lain awake all night trying to work himself into a good nightmare—*The Point* had come from a nightmare—and now he'd been at it in his workroom nearly all day. . . .

A sudden weariness swept over him. He placed his dark head on the drawing-board, half-closed his dark-blue eyes.

Sleepily, he took his pencil and drew a rough figure of *Enormo* on the section of scratch-sheet near his head. Good old *Enormo*. Those piercing eyes, that jutting chin, that shirt with the big *E* on it, those bulging red trousers . . . he certainly knocked off his villains quickly, didn't he? But what sort of villain would he knock off next?

Mike's long body relaxed, his breathing became more regular—and then, all at once, he had it. He snapped upright in his chair and began to beam broadly at himself, rolling the pencil in his fingers.

He had always used characters with one eccentricity of contour or appearance. Why not make it a full house this time—jumble all the horrors together and ring in a character who *really* looked like something?

He turned his gaze more fully

on the scratch-sheet and went to work. Head and ears first—the head completely hairless, like *The Egg*, one of the first villains in the series—the ears wide and cauli-flowered like a more recent monster, *The Loving Cup*. Then the eyes, nose and mouth, carefully picked from various horrors—and the body of *The Big*, the one character in the strip who had been even more enormous than *Enormo*.

He sketched a few more lines here and there, giving the thing not only life but *personality*, he hoped. Then he braced his hands on the edge of the drawing-board and lifted his head to take a good look.

"Eep," said Mike de Forrest. He leaped from his chair and slammed against the wall.

The last vestige of sleep was gone from his eyes. There was a mirror on the wall behind him, and he turned quickly and looked into it. He was a little surprised to find his dark hair still dark.

"Eep," he said again. Then, more calmly, "Now, *there* is a monster."

He had to fight the impulse, though, to turn and rush out the front door and down the stairs. Furtively, he approached the drawing-board.

This, he told himself, was screwy. He was Mike de Forrest—one inch over six feet, one

hundred and ninety pounds of lean muscle, as tough a bird as ever frightened a syndicate editor into giving a strip a bigger advertising campaign. This couldn't be happening: a tough bird like him afraid of one of his own characters.

He set his jaw and looked down. The second view improved in no particular upon the first. He reached the mirror, however, with even greater speed.

There was no doubt about it, he told his shaken reflection. He had created the prize monster of the century, and it scared the living daylights out of him.

After staring into his own seared eyeballs, he decided that another attempt would be foolhardy. Shaking his head and muttering to himself, he left the room. "What a *puss*," he told himself on the way to the shower.

His watch told him it was twenty minutes after six, which gave him less than an hour to shower, shave and dress for dinner. This was Tuesday, the evening he spent each week at the Graysons.

That was a break. Bill Grayson, who had gone to college with him, had something to do with banks—which Mike always thought of as Vice-President In Charge Of Sad Depositors—and was the solid, sturdy, level-headed type, and his wife, Helen, was

the same. Just the sort of people he needed tonight, he thought, feeling as shaky as he did.

Pausing only to turn on all the lights in the house, he went quickly about his business, and presented himself at the Grayson household ten minutes early.

As the door opened and Bill's round, grinning face peered out at him, he was pretty much the old Mike de Forrest again—the Mike de Forrest with the tough gleam in his eyes and the fit, jaunty swing to his wide shoulders. Bill's apartment was only half a mile from his own, and a brisk walk in the crisp, cool evening air had filled him full of the joy of life and quelled his startled memory of the monster on the scratch-sheet.

And then, two minutes later, all thoughts of *Enormo* and his playmates were swept out of his head with a suddenness that took his breath away and sent an entirely different sort of shiver up his spine.

If you were wondering what had happened to the love at first sight, wonder no longer. Her name was Dinah Stewart, and she was a guest of the Graysons'.

Dinah, Mike learned in across-the-table conversation, was an old school friend of Helen's, and was staying with the Graysons while her father finished up some out-

of-town business. Then he was going to join her here in New York, where they were to settle permanently.

Her father, Dinah told Mike, was old-fashioned and a bit on the stiff-collar side, and had consented to allow her to precede him only because she had been invited to stay at the home of a friend, and because the friend's husband was a respectable professional man.

"He felt I'd be safe here," she explained, her eyes shining at him.

Mike gazed at her, awed, and nodded mutely. His one desire at the moment was to keep her safe. In hundreds of daydreams he had imagined a girl like Dinah—he'd even drawn her, ineptly, into his *Enormo* strip. Any drawing he did of her would have had to be inept; she was, he told himself stickily, beyond art. She couldn't exist.

And yet, here she was—about five feet four (absolutely right), young body all slim loveliness (check), honey-colored hair, long, faintly upcurved brown eyes, tip-tilted nose and sweet, scarlet mouth (his personal specifications, exactly). Love at first sight was quite a mild word for it, Mike mused.

They went to a movie after dinner, the four of them, and he couldn't look away from her long

enough to watch the picture. They took a taxi to the theater and walked back, and the demure grace with which she moved (as required, precisely) made it a struggle for him to keep from taking her into his arms there and then.

Before the evening ended, he had decided to take a vacation from work and spend every possible moment trying to make Dinah feel toward him as he had always, he realized, felt toward her. He was slightly ahead of schedule on the strip anyhow, and though the fear he had for his monster was certainly ridiculous, the prospect of a vacation from him, too, made the scheme doubly pleasant.

He took Dinah for a tour of the city the next day, courageously releasing her after only an instant when a subway train threw her into his arms; then for a long walk along a rambling path in Central Park, holding her hand while they inhaled the delicately sharp scent of grass and trees; and finally, that evening, to a play—a tender and beautiful story of young love.

And she was so desirable through it all that, as they paused outside the Graysons' apartment to say goodnight, Mike took a deep breath, tried to think of something else, took another deep breath, and lost all control.

Gradually, he realized that two miracles were happening. He was kissing her; and she, magnificent and wonderful she, was kissing him.

For long minutes they clung together, precariously balanced on a staircase. Mike blinked his eyes and opened them and she was still there before him. Miracle, he thought, number three.

Then he took gentle hold of her shoulders and stared into her eyes.

Rose-color had crept into her face, near her high cheekbones, and she looked even lovelier than before.

"Will you marry me, Dinah?" he asked.

"Yes, Mike," she said softly. "Whenever you say. . . ."

And then, all at once, she gasped, the rose-color fled, and she looked away.

"What's the matter?" Mike asked anxiously.

She shook her head. "My father," she sighed.

"Well, what about your father?"

Her eyes stared off into space. "He's been so good to me I—I just couldn't marry without his permission. No matter how silly it sounds. And he'll never permit the marriage, Mike. He'll never let me marry you."

Mike stared. "What's the matter with *me*?" he asked.

"Your father doesn't even *know* me!"

"I told him—you draw—*Enormo*. He thinks it's a horrible thing. He thinks it undermines children. Mike, he hates you already."

"Hates . . ."

"Mike, he called you a monster. A perverter of little tots. He said tots. A beast in human form. Then he got up from the dinner-table and went away. He locked his study door and wouldn't let me in."

Slowly, Mike's wonderment faded, to be replaced by the *tough* look, the look which made syndicate editors hide under their desks and syndicate presidents use rear exits. "He'll unlock his door for me," he said.

"Mike, you simply don't know my father. People like you are his specialty. I remember, we had a male secretary once, and Father . . ."

"I don't even care to hear about it," Mike said. "I don't care how tough an old egg he is—if he stands in the way of this marriage I'll bring him down to soft-boiled status quicker than you can say *Enormo*. Dinah, my dear, you underestimate *me*. I'll just give him some brisk talk and the de Forrest eye, and before you know it he'll be whimpering and rubbing his cheek against my trouser-leg."

Dinah sighed. "All right, Mike. But don't forget I warned you."

Then she moved toward him. There passed an hour without conversation.

The remainder of the week was, as Mike kept telling himself in a wondering fashion, heaven. He saw Dinah for eighteen hours each day, spent half of the remaining six talking to her on the phone, and devoted the other three to dreaming about her. And in every hour that passed a new beauty appeared to his awed eyes.

He was, briefly, on top of the world, and spinning as dizzily as the North Pole. Life, he confided to the Graysons' Scotch terrier, was indubitably braw and bricht, not to mention licht.

He was young, in perfect health, and possessed of enough money to support a huge family through several lifetimes. He was in a business he enjoyed and as soon as he overcame an idiotic psychological quirk—he had a new villain for *Enormo*. And, of course, there was Dinah, not lightly to be shrugged off.

The elder Stewart he discounted completely. Obviously, a man who viewed *Enormo* as a perversion had a stone for a heart, and could hardly feel any affection for Dinah. And a man without

affection for Dinah, he felt, was a man disarmed.

Small wonder, then, that he sang as he walked through the streets, attracting rude stares and, once, a surprising twelve cents that had plunked into his hat as he waved it wildly in his hand.

The following Monday, on a gray, cold and rainy morning, Sidney B. Stewart arrived in New York.

The face that peered out from the half-opened Grayson door was wearing a wild, haunted look which Mike dismissed as merely silly. The hand that shook his was grave and unnaturally hot. Bill's usual stolid happiness had deteriorated completely. Mike thought it curious, but dismissed it from his mind airily.

Dinah was waiting for him in the long foyer. She kissed him feverishly, and he got the odd impression that it was the kind of kiss a girl gave a dearly beloved about to depart on a long journey.

"He's in the living-room," she said. "He's — expecting you. Good luck." She kissed him again.

"Never fear," Mike tossed over his shoulder.

He stepped into the living-room and felt behind him for support almost at once. Leaning weakly against a satisfying tough wall, he watched Sidney B. Stewart rise from an easy chair

to glare at him. Sidney B. Stewart rose . . . and rose . . . and rose.

He was bigger than *Enormo*, bigger than *The Big*. But mere bulk alone had never stopped Mike. It was the hairless head, the large, cauliflowered ears, the unutterably horrible eyes, nose and mouth that curdled Mike's blood and sent it swishing around in his shoes.

Sidney B. Stewart might just have stepped off the sketch-pad in Mike's workroom. He was the most horrible monster in the world, and he scared the living daylights out of Mike de Forrest.

Dimly, Mike heard a voice. "Father," Dinah said, "I want you to meet Michael de Forrest. Mike, this is my father."

"Delighted," Mike bleated, advancing a shrinking hand toward the mass of hairy flesh attached to Sidney B. Stewart's right sleeve.

"Urm," said Sidney B. Stewart, enclosing the hand with his own and squashing it politely.

He looked at Mike and Mike crept further into the wall.

"You draw *Enormo*," he said. "I do."

"It is a perversion. I dislike *Enormo*. You are teaching children to expect a world in which the hero always vanquishes the villain. It is not a true picture of the world in which we live."

"I—"

"Yes, yes. Doubtless all that is so. The fact remains that you are distorting the minds of small, defenseless children. It should be legally punishable. I shall be extremely happy if you do not visit my daughter again. I shall be—" a hand reached out and clamped Mike's shoulder suddenly—"extremely unhappy if you should continue in your attentions."

Mike squirmed loose from the gripping hand and moved farther along the wall. "I love Dinah and you're not going to stop me," he said, but it sounded a trifle weak.

"Indeed," the monstrous creature said. Abruptly, he turned his huge back on Mike and his terrifying gaze on Dinah. "I shall want a word with you later," he said. "Meanwhile, please excuse me. I should like to wash my hands."

He began to walk toward the door.

For a moment Mike watched him, stunned and shaken. Then, overcome by the spectacle of his collapsing dreams, he gave a low cry and leaped forward, plucking at the man's arm.

Sidney B. Stewart turned.

"Well?" he said.

Mike coughed.

"... marry your daughter," he said faintly.

A slow smile spread over Sidney B. Stewart's considerable

face. His eyes, which did not join in the smile, grew smaller, and the eyebrows over them formed a straight line.

"Surely," he began, and stopped. "Surely you did not say you wanted to marry my daughter?" He coughed.

Mike nodded. "Your daughter. Dinah. You know Dinah. Lovely girl."

"Young man," Stewart said. There was an eager, almost a pleading note in his voice. "Turn and look at the door for a moment."

Mike turned. He looked at the door. It was, all things considered, a fairly nice door. But before he could admire it properly—before he could note its fine carving and expert paint-job—something huge and firm caught him in the seat of the pants and shot him down the hall. He hit the floor and rolled over twice before he stopped against the far wall.

The door shut. He was compelled to view it from the other side. But he did not look at it now. Slowly, he rose. He put his ear to the door, straining to hear every word of Dinah's fine rage, her terrible anger. For a second he wondered how she could stand up to that monster. But then, she'd grown up with it; she was probably hereditarily immune.

There was only silence. He

could not deceive himself; Sidney B. Stewart had cowed them both. Dinah was afraid to speak.

He began to open the door. The intelligent thing to do was to take another crack at it, after all; but his hand did not touch the doorknob. Though it sickened and revolted him to admit it, he did not have the courage to face Sidney B. Stewart again that night.

He tilted back and forth for a moment while Thoughts of Nuptial Bliss struggled to overcome Stark Fear. It was no use.

Shoulders sagging, he turned and crawled out of the apartment.

The passage of time had healed his wounds a little when, some minutes later, he entered his own apartment, but even that minutely happier feeling did not last. He had dragged Dinah into while-you-wait photo studios at every opportunity during the past week, and had accumulated a veritable wallpapering of pictures of her. It seemed now, to his feverish eyes, that each one looked accusing and bitterly disappointed.

Blindly, he fled into his workroom, viewing the bare walls with relief. He slumped into a chair in front of his drawing-board. Then, quickly, he leaped up again. The face of Sidney B. Stewart leered up at him frighteningly.

Standing a few feet away, he told himself the whole thing was silly.

The resemblance was all in his mind. There was no real similarity.

He forced himself back for a closer look. The monster, on close examination, looked even more like The Monster.

On a sudden impulse he ran into his hall, plucked a picture of Dinah from the wall, and searched for a back strip of *Enormo*. He put both exhibits close together.

Dinah—and Dinah. They were identical.

He thought about it. Dinah: Dinah. Stewart: the monster.

Where, he asked himself, is *Enormo*?

But the answer to that one was easy. After all, he'd never been drawn into a sequence with the monster.

Neither had Dinah—but then, Dinah had always been in his thoughts and that might account for something.

Not that it made any difference. Feverishly, he grabbed a pencil and began to draw.

Enormo—wearing the clothing, appearance, and mental makeup of Michael de Forrest—entered the Grayson residence boldly. Bill tried to grin; the effort was pathetic. *Enormo* said,

invincibly, "I am looking for Mr. Sidney B. Stewart."

"Sure," Bill said. "He's in the study, resting. The effort of kicking you out seems to have taken something out of the poor man."

"I see," *Enormo* said. "And Dinah?"

"She's in there with him. He wanted to talk to her."

"Good." Without further comment, *Enormo* strode to the study door and pulled it open. Sidney B. Stewart looked up in surprise.

"I thought I told—" he started, and then smiled horribly. "Ah. Mr. de Forrest has returned."

"He has," *Enormo* stated. "He wishes a word with you. Dinah, stay here."

"Mike!" she said.

"This will all be cleared up in a moment. Mr. Stewart—"

"Yes?"

"You have refused to allow me to marry your daughter. Allow me to contradict your wishes. I intend to marry your daughter at once. You will give us permission, this very instant." He stared into the eyes of the monster.

"I re—" Sidney B. Stewart began, but the effort was too much for him. Under the glare of those invincible steely eyes, he broke.

"I agree." The words were a whisper.

"Mike!" Dinah said, and was in *Enormo*'s arms.

Gently he disengaged her. "I can never love you," he said. "I am committed to a greater cause—the cause of Right. Right shall triumph." He strode out of the room. Dinah's sobbing followed him.

"Damn it," Mike said to his reflection, "I forgot *Enormo* was impervious to women."

A lot of good it does you to curse now, he told himself. The time to think is before the act is done. Now you've ruined yourself for good with the girl. You've gone and walked right out of her young life.

"I didn't," Mike said. "*Enormo* did."

And, he thought, a fat lot of difference that makes. You're stopped cold, and you might as well admit it.

"I'm not."

Oh, yes you are.

"But . . ."

Mike began to pace the floor, steadily. His mind was whirling dizzily. Obviously, drawing *Enormo* into his problems didn't work. *Enormo* was all right for villains and bullets and things, but when it came to women he was an extremely total loss.

But if the situation had come

out of the strip, if he'd actually created Dinah and her father in some blinding flash of artwork—or something; he hadn't yet figured out just how it had been done—then the solution had to come from the strip too. And there had to be a solution. His young life was not, he insisted, going to be blighted by a mere slip of the pen.

He sat and stared at the drawing of the monster. "It started with you," he told it, "and it has to end with you." The monster did not reply.

Then, suddenly, as once before, he had it. The solution stared him in the face. Quickly he erased a few lines of his drawing, added others. He built up the hair on the monster's head, gave him a kindly expression, lopped off the ears and replaced them with small, shell-like creations. It took a little over an hour.

"Your own mother," he told the kindly, understanding man who looked up at him, "wouldn't recognize you."

Then he went off to discuss, in a gentlemanly fashion, the problem of his marriage. He was

quite sure her father would be reasonable.

"But what," Dinah asked later, "are you going to do for a villain for the next six weeks?"

He shrugged. "Let's not bother about it," he said, reaching for her. "I'm glad your father happened to be home."

"I've never seen him so pleased with anybody. He really likes you," Dinah said. "He's sweet."

Mike said, "I'm giving up *Enormo*. Advertising work—there's the field. Drawing those cigarettes, food, drinks—why, a man can support himself with ease."

"Models," Dinah reproved him.

"What?"

"Those models you'll have to draw."

"A mere nothing," he said. "You'll be all the model I'll ever need, believe me."

"I'm glad," she said. There was silence for a long time.

The minister looked exactly like Police Captain McMuck.

NIGHT ON HORSEBACK

By WINSTON K. MARKS



WHAT a dream! I was on a place called Earth, a fantastically beautiful sphere of moderate temperatures, liquid waters, spacious continents and a glorious, exhilarating atmosphere abounding in intoxicating oxygen.

It was good to be alive! I sucked the sweet stuff into my broad chest and urged my white charger down the shady country lane. Before I had gone far I came to a swift stream with a narrow, gravelly shallows for a horse to ford without swimming.

As my stallion stepped into the swirling current a snorting, black horse galloped up from the far side. His rider, a great bloated pig of a man, larger even than I, reined up and roared, "Out of my way, varlet!"

He rushed me. Coolly I dropped the point of my lance and moved in. We collided in mid-stream, lance to shield, fair blows both, and the lances splintered.

My broadsword leaped to my mailed fist, and with a single smite I sent his quaking lard squalling into the deep, muddy pool.

Only then did I see the trembling, white-veiled female who had ridden in attendance to my boorish opponent. The nostrils of her longish nose flared like those of the nervous mount she rode side-saddle. Her lovely, flat bosom heaved with a quick, mysterious emotion, and before I could address her she wheeled her mount and disappeared down the path. I drew slowly across the ford, and a still pool near the shore threw back my reflection as I stared pensively into it. My handsomely rugged face was flushed, for the timid damsel's abrupt motion on her horse had swung her riding skirt in an immodest arc. I could not avoid seeing her dainty feet, her thick ankle and fat calf up to where it

vanished into a delightfully knobby knee.

With the scent of a gentler adventure and a heavy perfume in my aquiline nostrils I stirred my charger and rode forth in pursuit.

At length I came upon a great city and found myself embroiled in considerable and noisy vehicular traffic in the narrow canyons between cliff-like structures of stone and glass. The assorted conveyances seemed to be given their lethargic motion by a combination of expelled exhaust gases and audible sound vibrations which burst forth intermittently in strident braying cacophony.

I spied my lady fair trying to cross the intersection of two canyons. Her costume was changed to a trim, white linen suit with a perky basket of fruit perched on her lovely salt-and-pepper hair. As I reined to make a left turn in her quest, a blue-cloth-coated minion grabbed milady and gesticulated obscenely. It appeared she had violated the sacerdotal bidding of the corner totem post which winked balefully with green and red eyes, or so the minion screamed in a bull's voice. He was a great bloated pig of a man. Larger even than I, and certainly the twin of my adversary at the ford.

Unarmed except for some

ridiculous - little sideweapon which he withdrew from a leathern pouch at his belt, upon my approach, he presented no worthy resistance. So I merely slapped the object from his hand, spun him and whacked him sturdily on the backside with my sword. Having seemed to recognize me, he gave terrified tongue and ran madly into the path of an oncoming huge vehicle whose iron wheels dealt with him more severely, perhaps, than he truly deserved.

In the confusion my gentle, feminine quarry slipped into the maw of a mammoth structure, an edifice whose height was so great I could not tilt my head enough to view its crown. With a flap of my snaffle-rein I clattered through the clutter of squatly, covered carts, heedlessly raking fenders and turret-tops with my charger's poitrel.

With a jolly jangle I dismounted, and as I dropped the snaffle insecurely around the peculiar tieing post at the roadside, a bevy of insignificant females of various luscious proportions gathered about and accosted me by such titles as Tyrone, Gary, Montgomery, Clark and the outlandish like. Vermilion lips pursed and uttered soft, low whistles of insinuating impurity. No vestal virgins, these.

Into the arched entrance I strode, too late discovering that a portal of sorts, transparent but palpable, barred my way. The shards of it cascaded from my breast-plate and pauplrons, but since I was helmet-less, a crystal fragment sliced an interesting wound beneath my blue left eye.

I came upon my beloved waiting before yet another portal and staring anxiously at a bronzed pointer above the gate. The pointer moved mysteriously on a pivot and held the attention of several persons. As I approached her, a gray-suited hulk brushed past me and confronted her first.

He was a great bloated pig of a man, larger even than I.

He grasped her wrist cruelly and made her kneel to the marble floor. His lips twisted into a bestial snarl. "Late again, returning from lunch, eh? Do you think I pay you to dwaddle over your sauerkraut and potato salad?" he demanded. "I run an office, not an old maid's club, Miss Crebbes. Take a letter, damn you, Miss Crebbes. Take a letter. Take a letter."

For a moment I stood shocked. Then, withdrawing my gauntlet, I clapped the boor on the side of his bristly haircut. "Sirrah," I addressed him, "you abuse this dream-maiden! You vilify her by your tongue insults. You con-

taminate her with your loathsome touch. Have at you, sir!"

As the swine faced me his face blanched, and my own skin tightened with chagrin. Was the man indestructible, or was this the triplet of my two recently vanquished foes?

A wicked rapier of impossible design flashed into his ham of a fist from some devilish source, and he belaboured me soundly up and down the vaulted chamber before I deftly severed his sword hand an inch above the wrist. Then I stripped the floppy garments from his gross body and bludgeoned every area of him with the broadside of my weapon until he collapsed vilely into a pool of his own filthy blood.

My squatly maiden fair croaked, "Arthur!" and swooned heavily into my arms, which were, forsooth, already tired. Amid the cheers of a hundred straining voices I swept her out to my charger, and we galloped to the suburbs apace.

Instinctively I turned in

through the white picket gate of a neat fence surrounding a quaint little stone cottage. Fragrant roses bordered the flagstones and arbored the entrance. Inside she slipped into something more comfortable, while I shed my armour and mixed a drink.

She came to me, my virgin love, resplendent in a filmy garment so transparent that it barely concealed her girdle. By mutual, silent consent we drifted to the sofa, an overstuffed piece with nary a protruding horsehair, and as I crushed her to my leathern jerkin her freckled eyelids lifted. She stared deeply into my eyes. A rare ecstasy and veritable miasma of perfume enveloped us, driven only by her gasping sighs.

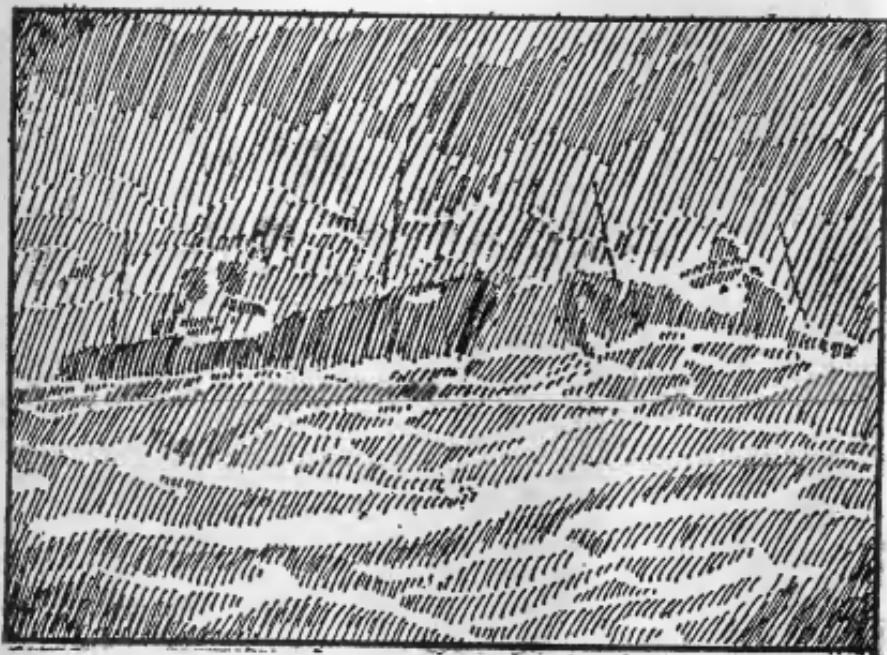
"I dream, Arthur, my love," she whispered, "so pinch me, but gently lest I should awaken. I would not awaken."

But I pinched her hard, nonetheless.

And she did, of course, awaken.

SHADOW BEFORE

By A. BERTRAM CHANDLER



"YES, that's the Bishop," said the Second Mate impatiently. Half consciously he counted the seconds between flashes, satisfied himself that they tallied with the period given in the Light List. "We're up to the Scillies on time. All going well; weather permitting, we should be fast alongside in Glasgow tomorrow night."

"What do you mean?" asked

Canning. "Weather permitting? Surely it will stay fine."

The attitude of earnest enquirer sat well upon both him and his wife, as it so often does upon dowdy, middle aged couples. All the way from Sydney they had shown an intense interest in maritime affairs, an avid curiosity that soon caused most of the ship's officers to avoid them. It was the Second Mate

who had discovered their Achilles' Heel, the weak joint in their armour. They were spiritualists. Mrs. Canning was a medium of some repute. And they lent a receptive ear to all the stories that he had to tell them. Tall tales all, retailed at third or fourth hand, losing nothing in the retelling.

"Fog," explained Weldon briefly. "The glass is too high, and there's no wind. Even with radar you don't want to go charging up the Irish Sea and seeing nothing. If there were no traffic it'd be different. . . . But this house in Dublin, now . . .

"They were very grateful for the lift, these two girls, and they asked him in for a drink. But he was late already, and knew that his wife would be worrying. But they had their way, and he got out of the car and went in with them. The house was nicely furnished and well kept, and in a small sitting room the three of them sat down and dipped their beaks into a glass of port—or sherry, I forget which. And they had one cigarette each, which he supplied from his case. . . ."

The Fifth Officer, enjoying his evening constitutional and after dinner cigarette with his current girl friend, passed, muttered audibly: "It all ghost to show. . . ." Weldon shot him a dirty look and continued.

"Just one cigarette, and one glass of wine. And then he said that he really *must* go, and so he said goodnight, and let himself out, got in his car and drove home. Next morning, dressing, he missed his case. He was somewhat miffed about it, as it was a present from his wife. He thought back, remembered where he had left it. The house wasn't in a part of Dublin where any of his own patients lived, but he thought that he could find it.

"He did find it. It was deserted—shutters up, garden a mess of weeds. Nevertheless, he was determined to get his case back, and hammered on the door. Nobody answered, of course, but eventually the woman next door—the place was semi-detached—poked her head over the fence and said that there wasn't anyone in, that there hadn't been anyone in for three years, and that the two ladies who *did* live there had up and vanished. . . .

"But he was quite convinced that it was the right house, and at last forced an entry through the kitchen window. The inside was as bad a mess as the outside—dust everywhere. He found the little room where they had had their wine. He found the table with the decanter and the three empty glasses—all with a good half inch of dust on 'em. And he found his fag case.

"I don't think it was ghosts. It was, it must have been, some kind of Kink in Time. . . . That would account for the two women waiting at the bus stop at an hour when all buses had long ceased running."

"You materialists," replied Mrs. Canning in a pitying voice. "You won't face up to the facts about the Other World. You invent marvellous explanations that are far more fantastic than anything that *we* say or claim. It was apparitions of the dead he saw. . . ."

"Maybe so. But what about the house? Everything in order and well kept. . . ."

"In a case like that, Mr. Weldon, he would see the house through the eyes of the apparitions. They wanted him to *find* something there. . . ."

"He found his case."

". . . something that would throw light upon their mysterious disappearance. Ah, if only I had something, anything, from that room!"

"Psychometry, Flora?" asked Canning. Then, to Weldon, "She says she isn't very good at it, but I've seen some *amazing* results. . . ."

"Really, George," protested Mrs. Canning insincerely, "I'm not very good."

"Psychometry?" asked Wel-

don. "Is that what they call spirit writing?"

"No—although Flora is very good at that too. Psychometry is done with objects, or letters, or photographs. She takes them in her hand, tells me about them and their . . . associations."

"But this spirit writing. . . . Do you think that you could do some here?"

"Surely this ship isn't haunted, Mr. Weldon?"

The Second Officer did not smile—one knowing him would have said that he looked more than a little serious. He hesitated before making his reply. Then—

"I don't know. I wish I did know. There's been something funny about her this trip. Just little things—but too many of 'em. As though somebody with unlimited ingenuity, but very little strength, was trying to throw our time table out of gear. It has been like a ship I was in during the war—she was determined not to catch a certain westbound convoy from Milford Haven. Everything went wrong—but they delayed the sailing of the convoy so we could make it. Then we developed boiler trouble and had to put into Liverpool. The convoy we finally caught enjoyed a quiet crossing to the States. And so did the one we should have caught—but with our original schedule unchanged."

we might well have been somewhere in time to catch some real trouble. . . ."

"Well, this trip in *this* ship, the steering gear went haywire—and they don't know to this day just how or why it did—just as we were passing under Sydney Bridge. But the pilot used our twin screws intelligently and we didn't hit anything. Then there was a fire started in Number 2—but it was discovered before it got going properly. There has been an epidemic of small things—*Liverpool Man* goings on. You don't know that phrase, do you? If you come up to the chartroom and find that somebody has spilled the ink over the chart, and nobody will own up to it—that's the Liverpool Man's doing. . . .

"Perhaps I've been more than usually sensitive this trip. We have a child coming, our first, and with luck I should be home just in time to welcome him into this little world. But all the luck seems to be the wrong kind. . . ."

Canning was unimpressed. Weldon's story was so tame, so unspectacular, compared with the tall tales he had been telling them. But Mrs. Canning was eager. Her almost colorless eyes shone behind the spectacles, the plain, dull face had taken an unwonted vivacity. She put out

her right arm, flexed her fingers.

"I can *feel* . . . " she declared. "Mr. Weldon can come along to our cabin, George."

"'Fraid I can't," replied the Second. "Company's Rules and all that. But we're allowed to entertain passengers in *our* accommodation — provided that everything is strictly decorous. Will you come up? We can have a drink to lay the dust of dinner."

The Cannings accepted. They followed the officer up the ladder, along the boat deck to the officers' flat under the bridge. They seated themselves on Weldon's settee while he investigated the contents of the locker under his desk.

"There's some brandy here," he told them, "not too bad. And there's some barely drinkable port. . . ."

"Could I have a port and lemon?" asked the medium.

"Sorry, haven't any lemonade in stock. Would orange cordial and a splash of soda do?"

"It would be lovely."

Weldon mixed the drink, wondered how anybody could take such a revolting mixture, poured a brandy each for himself and Canning. Flora Canning delicately sipped her sickly concoction and then, suddenly, stiffened.

"There's a man here," she

said. "Standing by the door. I think he's something to do with wireless. I get an impression of valves and wires and . . . things. He's very unhappy. He seems to belong to this room—or to somebody in it. Did you have a friend, a wireless operator, who was killed in the war?"

Weldon politely wrinkled his brow, succeeded only in corrugating his expression of impolite incredulity.

"No," he said shortly.

"I can see that you don't believe, Mr. Weldon. But it's a relation of yours, I'm sure. There's such a strong resemblance."

Then she gave a little scream as a deep, mournful bellow shook the room. Canning dropped his glass. Even the officer, who had been half expecting it, started. He got to his feet, looked through the port. "Fog," he said. "Thick as pea soup. Thank God for radar!"

"He's gone," lamented the medium. "It must have been that awful whistle. I don't think that I can do *anything* now."

"Try," begged her husband. "Try, Flora. After all, this may be the last night of the voyage. And who knows what we may find out!"

Weldon asked, "What do you need?"

"A writing pad—a large one

if you have it. A pencil—soft."

"Can do. Here—you'd better sit at my desk, Mrs. Canning. I'll sit on the settee with Mr. Canning."

There was a knock at the door.

"Yes?" called Weldon.

It was the stand-by quartermaster.

"Can you come up to the bridge, sir?" he asked. "The echo sounder's not working."

"Somebody's been tinkering with it. Oh, well—make yourselves at home. I shan't be long. There's fags in the box, and another drink or two in the bottles. . . ."

When he had gone Mrs. Canning said, "Perhaps it will be better now. He doesn't believe. His vibrations are all wrong. But there's *something* here—and I mean to find out who or what it is."

"What do you think, Flora?"

"That's what we have to find out, dear. Pour me another drink, will you? And is this his pad? It's too small."

"Try this."

This was a cargo plan in Weldon's desk. Canning took it, turned it over so that the plain side was presented as a writing surface. His wife sat in Weldon's chair, held the pencil loosely in her right hand. Her eyes closed. Then—

Hard . . . she wrote. *Hard*.

Struggle all time to get through. Adverse forces. Inertia. Give lever big enough and I move Earth—but only little levers and time short. . . .

"Who are you?" asked Canning. "What do you want?" But the scribbling pencil ignored his questions.

Must stop it now before too late. My father killed this ship, collision in fog. Little damage, only one dead—my father. Went inspect place where hit, slipped wet planking, drowned. Tell him careful, careful. Make him believe.

"What . . . ?" began Canning. Then—"When? When did all this happen? What can we do about it now?"

The whistle sounded again, the prolonged blast making the very air of the room quiver. Mrs. Canning shivered, her jerkily scribbling hand slowed to a stop. Her eyelids flickered. She stirred uneasily in her chair, made a sound that was half sigh, half moan.

Then she slumped. The pencil moved uncertainly, doodled. Canning, peering over his wife's shoulder, tried hard to read some significance into the formless scrawls. Then the pencil was off again in a barely legible race against time.

Father dead, mother married again. Unhappy home. Turned

out wrong, bad. Caused suffering, misery. And, at end, I was murderer. Perhaps this Hell, Purgatory. Don't know. But must try change course of events. Hard, too hard. Too much inertia. Strong forces fighting all time. Tell him—and the pronoun was heavily underscored—careful. Send someone else. . . .

"Who?" demanded Canning. "Who has to be careful?"

My father. . . .

"But he's dead. You said so."

Not yet. When die Time all mixed up. Direction, not duration. Will be dead—but not yet. Must try save. Must. . . .

And again the whistle belowed. And again the medium stirred and shifted while the writing hand hesitated, slowed—stopped. And this time she did awake. It was a sharp, staccato sound that did it—the quartermaster rapping on the door.

"Mr. Weldon's compliments, sir, but he won't be down for a while. He's helping the Chief Radio Officer fix the radar. . . ."

"It's gone!" cried the medium. "The power is gone!"

"No, ma'am. I don't think it's that. I heard 'em say it was a valve burned out."

"I didn't . . ." began Mrs. Canning. Her husband laid a quieting hand on her shoulder, squeezed hard.

"Thank you, my man," he said stuffily.

The quartermaster looked curiously at the odd couple in the Second Officer's room. He said nothing more—just raised his eyebrows and turned to go. As soon as he was out of sight Canning said, "Now, read it. What do you make of it, Flora?"

"Give me time."

The woman picked up the reversed cargo plan, puckered her brows over what was scrawled on the paper. She demanded angrily, "What is this? George, did you . . . ?"

"Of course not, darling. How could I?"

"But this is utterly absurd. It must be somebody's idea of a joke—somebody who overheard Mr. Weldon's silly theories about Kinks in Time. Kinks in Time, indeed! A departed spirit comes from the past."

"Of course, dear," put in the husband timidly, "there's Dunne. I know you never would read his 'Experiment With Time', but . . ."

"What sensible person would? Surely we can have clairvoyance and prophecy without dragging in all this rubbish about Fourth Dimensions! But I think I know. . . . You remember that guide I had a year or so ago—the one who said that he was an ancient Egyptian, the one I had to get

rid of. Ancient Egyptian! He was such a liar he might have been anything! This is the kind of thing that he'd do. It must be spite."

She took the paper in her hand, made as if to screw it up.

"Don't!" said Canning sharply.

"And why not? Oh, there's all this stuff on the back of it. Though Mr. Weldon doesn't deserve to have it back—I hold him partly responsible for this exhibition of childish humor. There!" She ripped the plan viciously across. "And there! Kinks in Time, indeed!"

The wastepaper basket received the dubious evidence of temporal twists and tangles.

Canning looked worried. He picked up the brandy bottle, refilled his glass. He took its contents neat.

"All the same," he said slowly, "I think we should warn the Captain. According to this there's going to be a collision—and that's a serious matter even if nobody's killed. . . ."

"Collision — fiddlesticks! Besides. . . ."

She left the sentence unfinished, but her husband was sufficiently telepathic to get her meaning. A worried shipmaster, on the bridge of his ship in dense fog, would not welcome the sudden incursion of two spiritualists

bearing warnings of imminent disaster. This was rendered even more certain by the fact that the Captain and the Cannings were not on speaking terms, had not been since the day that they, in all innocence, had asked if they could hold a spiritualist service each Sunday.

Canning had his faith—but he was not yet prepared to become a martyr to it.

"Then let us go, my dear," he suggested. "We will see Mr. Weldon in the morning."

Not far from the Second Officer's cabin was a room of which only he possessed the key. From it came the low, steady music of electric motors, a continuous, quietly regular clicking. It was the Master Compass Room. In the middle of the deck stood the binnacle, and this, too, was always kept locked. Inside the binnacle was the heavy gyroscope, suspended in the midst of the intricacies—vertical ring, phantom ring, mercury ballistic, azimuth motor, follow up system—that made it a compass. The clicking noise came from the trolleys running back and forth over their contactor blocks as the compass "hunted."

But a compass, however efficient, is not much good if it is not placed where the helmsman can steer by it. So, in addition to

the Master, there are Repeaters—these being sited as and where required.

To transmit the motions of the Master, relative to the ship, to the Repeaters there is the transmitter. This is a little carriage, with a roller brush at the end of each of its arms, rotating inside a ring whose inner periphery is made up of copper segments—the contacts. As the roller brushes pass over these contacts so the repeaters click over—one third of a degree for each segment.

In the bottom of the binnacle were two pieces of paper. These were there for a purpose. They were what Weldon used daily to clean his trolleys and contactors—not to be confused with the transmitter carriage and contacts—by sliding the thin material between polished wheel and polished surface.

The light was out in the Master Compass Room—but, in any case, there was nobody, nobody corporeal, to see the two scraps of paper float and flutter up from the bottom of the binnacle, from under the gyroscope casing, drift unsteadily to the transmitter. There was nobody to see them sliding—slowly, hesitantly—between the carbon roller brushes and the copper contacts.

The ship, not steering too well, yawed; her head fell off from

000 to 004. The carriage of the transmitter turned on its axis, following the relative movements of the master compass. But the repeaters on the bridge did not follow—paper can be a good insulator. And paper is light—very little energy is required to lift two pieces—each, say, two inches square. Less energy than is required to pull down a heavy switch—especially when that switch has to be pulled against all the inertia of the past.

Then the makeshift insulators, their work done, fell from their insecure position between brushes and contacts. There was no one to see them fall. Save for the pseudolife of the machines the Master Compass Room was empty.

"That will do the whistle," said the Captain thankfully. Then—"Full Ahead both. Full Away!"

In the radar shack Weldon, still helping the Chief Radio Officer, heard the welcome noise of the telegraphs, the double ring signifying that Stand By was ended. He opened the door and looked outside. "It's lifted, Paddy," he said. "It's a beautiful night. . . ." His eye was caught and held by a bright, but fast diminishing, stern light abaft the

beam. "Hell! She, whoever she was, didn't miss us by much!"

"A miss is as good as a mile," replied Paddy philosophically. "Full speed again? Looks as though you might make it after all."

"Hope so. Rather think I shall now. Somehow, I'm *sure* that I shall. You know—I've been quite worried about it this trip—the first one and all that. And I've been wanting rather badly to be on hand to welcome young Michael into this vale of tears, to say nothing of being able to lend moral support to Jane. And I had an absurd sort of—what was it we used to call it during the war?—premonition of impending doom. But it's gone now. It's like . . . like some sort of shadow that's lifted with the fog.

"Oh, well—you can manage without me now. Doesn't look as though we'll be needing the magic eye again. I'll tell the Third to get an azimuth to make sure that the gyro isn't playing silly beggars—then I'll turf those weird Cannings out of my room and get some sleep before midnight. . . ."

Fading fast astern the event, past in Space and Time, never now to come, no longer cast its shadow before.

WHEN THE FIVE MOONS RISE

By JACK VANCE



SEGUило could not have gone so far; there was no place for him to go. Once Perrin had searched the lighthouse and the lonesome acre of rock, there were no other possibilities—only the sky and the ocean.

Seguilo was neither inside the lighthouse nor was he outside.

Perrin went out into the night, squinted up against the five moons. Seguilo was not to be seen on top the lighthouse.

Seguilo had disappeared.

Perrin looked indecisively over the flowing brine of Maurnilum Var. Had Seguilo slipped on the damp rock and

fallen into the sea, he certainly would have called out . . . The five moons blinked, dazzled, glinted along the surface; Seguilo might even now be floating unseen a hundred yards distant.

Perrin shouted across the dark water: "Seguilo!"

He turned, once more looked up the face of the lighthouse—seventy feet of welded steel. Around the horizon whirled the twin shafts of red and white light, guiding the barges crossing from South Continent to Spacetown, warning them off Isel Rock.

Perrin walked quickly toward the lighthouse. Seguilo was no doubt asleep in his bunk or in the bathroom.

Perrin went to the top chamber, circled the lumenifer, climbed down the stairs. "Seguilo!"

No answer. The lighthouse returned a metallic vibrating echo.

Seguilo was not in his room, in the bathroom, in the commissary, or in the storeroom. Where else could a man go?

Perrin looked out the door. The five moons cast confusing shadows. He saw a gray blot: "Seguilo!" He ran outside. "Where have you been?"

Seguilo straightened to his full height, a thin man with a wise doleful face. He turned his

head; the wind blew his words past Perrin's ears.

Sudden enlightenment came to Perrin. "You must have been under the generator!" The only place he could have been,

Seguilo had come closer. "Yes . . . I was under the generator." He paused uncertainly by the door, stood looking up at the moons, which this evening had risen all bunched together. Puzzlement creased Perrin's forehead. Why should Seguilo crawl under the generator? "Are you—well?"

"Yes. Perfectly well."

Perrin stepped closer and in the light of the five moons, Ista, Bista, Liad, Miad and Pojdel, scrutinized Seguilo sharply. His eyes were dull and non-committal; he seemed to carry himself stiffly. "Have you hurt yourself? Come over to the steps and sit down."

"Very well." Seguilo ambled across the rock, sat down on the steps.

"You're certain you're all right?"

"Certain."

After a moment Perrin said, "Just before you—went under the generator, you were about to tell me something you said was important."

Seguilo nodded slowly. "That's true."

"What was it?"

Seguilo stared dumbly up into the sky. There was nothing to be heard but the wash of the sea, hissing and rushing where the rock shelved under.

"Well?" asked Perrin finally. Seguilo hesitated.

"You said that when five moons rose together in the sky, it was not wise to believe anything."

"Ah," nodded Seguilo, "so I did."

"What did you mean?"

"I'm not sure."

"Why is not believing anything important?"

"I don't know."

Perrin rose abruptly to his feet. Seguilo normally was crisp, dryly emphatic. "Are you sure you're all right?"

"Right as rain."

That was more like Seguilo. "Maybe a drink of whiskey would fix you up."

"Sounds like a good idea."

Perrin knew where Seguilo kept his private store. "You sit here, I'll get you a shot."

"Yes, I'll sit here."

Perrin hurried inside the lighthouse, clambered the two flights of stairs to the commissary. Seguilo might remain seated or he might not; something in his posture, in the rapt gaze out to sea, suggested that he might not. Perrin found the bottle and the glass, ran back down the steps.

Somehow he knew that Seguilo would be gone.

Seguilo was gone. He was not on the steps, nowhere on the windy acre of Isel Rock. It was impossible that he had passed Perrin on the stairs. He might have slipped into the engine room and crawled under the generator once more.

Perrin flung open the door, switched on the lights, stooped, peered under the housing. Nothing.

A greasy film of dust, uniform, unmarred, indicated that no one had ever been there.

Where was Seguilo?

Fighting the sudden rush of panic, Perrin went up to the topmost part of the lighthouse, carefully searched every nook and cranny down to the outside entrance. No Seguilo.

Perrin walked out on the rock, bare and empty; no Seguilo.

Seguilo was gone. The dark water of Maurnilam Var sighed and flowed across the shelf.

Perrin opened his mouth to shout across the moon-dazzled swells, but somehow it did not seem right to shout. He went back to the lighthouse, seated himself before the radio transceiver.

Uncertainly he touched the dials; the instrument had been Seguilo's responsibility. Seguilo had built it himself, from parts

salvaged from a pair of old instruments.

Perrin tentatively flipped a switch. The screen sputtered into light, the speaker hummed and buzzed. Perrin made hasty adjustments. The screen streaked with darts of blue light, a spatter of quick red blots. Fuzzy, dim, a face looked forth from the screen. Perrin recognized a junior clerk in the Commission office at Spacetown. He spoke urgently. "This is Harold Perrin, at Isel Rock Lighthouse; send out a relief ship. . . . Do you hear? There's been an accident; send out a relief ship."

The face in the screen looked at him as through thick pebble glass. A faint voice, overlaid by sputtering and crackling, said, "Adjust your tuning. . . . I can't hear you. . . ."

Perrin raised his voice. "Can you hear me now?"

The face in the screen wavered and faded.

Perrin yelled, "This is Isel Rock Lighthouse! Send out a relief ship! Do you hear? There's been an accident!"

"—signals not coming in. Make out a report, send—" the voice sputtered away.

Cursing furiously under his breath, Perrin twisted knobs, flipped switches. He pounded the set with his fist. The screen flashed bright orange, went dead.

Perrin ran behind, worked an anguished five minutes, to no avail. No light, no sound.

Perrin slowly rose to his feet. Through the window he glimpsed the five moons racing for the west. "When the five moons rise together," Seguilo had said, "it's not wise to believe anything." Seguilo was gone. He had been gone once before and come back; maybe he would come back again. Perrin grimaced, shuddered. It would be best now if Seguilo stayed away. He ran down to the outer door, barred and bolted it. Hard on Seguilo, if he came wandering back. . . . Perrin leaned a moment with his back to the door, listening. Then he went to the generator room, looked under the generator. Nothing. He shut the door, climbed the steps.

Nothing in the commissary, the storeroom, the bathroom, the bedrooms. No one in the lightroom. No one on the roof.

No one in the lighthouse but Perrin.

He returned to the commissary, brewed a pot of coffee, sat half an hour listening to the sigh of water across the shelf, then went to his bunk.

Passing Seguilo's room he looked in. The bunk was empty.

When at last he rose in the morning, his mouth was dry, his muscles like bundles of

withes, his eyes hot from long staring up at the ceiling. He rinsed his face with cold water and, going to the window, searched the horizon. A curtain of dingy overcast hung halfway up the east; blue-green Magda shone through like an ancient coin covered with verdigris. Over the water oily skeins of blue-green light formed and joined and broke and melted. . . . Out along the south horizon Perrin spied a pair of black hyphens — barges riding the Trade Current to Spacetown. After a few moments they disappeared into the overcast.

Perrin threw the master switch; above him came the fluttering hum of the lumenifer slowing and dimming.

He descended the stairs, with stiff fingers unbolted the door, flung it wide. The wind blew past his ears, smelling of Maurnilam Var. The tide was low; Isel Rock rose out of the water like a saddle. He walked gingerly to the water's edge. Blue-green Magda broke clear of the overcast; the light struck under the water. Leaning precariously over the shelf, Perrin looked down, past shadows and ledges and grottos, down into the gloom. . . . Movement of some kind: Perrin strained to see. His foot slipped, he almost fell.

Perrin returned to the light-

house, worked a disconsolate three hours at the transceiver, finally deciding that some vital component had been destroyed.

He opened a lunch unit, pulled a chair to the window, sat gazing across the ocean. Eleven weeks to the relief ship. Isel Rock had been lonely enough with Seguilo.

Blue-green Magda sank in the west. A sulfur overcast drifted up to meet it. Sunset brought a few minutes of sad glory to the sky: jade-colored stain with violet streakings. Perrin started the twin shafts of red and white on their nocturnal sweep, went to stand by the window.

The tide was rising, the water surged over the shelf with a heavy sound. Up from the west floated a moon: Ista, Bista, Liad, Miad, or Poidel? A native would know at a glance. Up they came, one after the other, five balls blue as old ice.

"It's not wise to believe. . . ." What had Seguilo meant? Perrin tried to think back. Seguilo had said, "It's not often, very rare, in fact, that the five moons bunch up—but when they do, then there's high tides." He had hesitated, glancing out at the shelf. "When the five moons rise, together," said Seguilo, "it's not wise to believe anything."

Perrin had gazed at him with forehead creased in puzzlement. Seguilo was an old hand, who

knew the fables and lore, which he brought forth from time to time. Perrin had never known quite what to expect from Seguilo; he had the trait indispensable to a lighthouse tender—taciturnity. The transceiver had been his hobby; in Perrin's ignorant hands, the instrument had destroyed itself. What the lighthouse needed, thought Perrin, was one of the new transceivers with self-contained power unit, master control, the new organic screen, soft and elastic, like a great eye. . . . A sudden rain squall blanketed half the sky; the five moons hurtled toward the cloud-bank. The tide surged high over the shelf, almost over a blocky gray mass. Perrin eyed it with interest; what could it be? . . . About the size of a transceiver, about the same shape. Of course, it could not possibly be a transceiver; yet, what a wonderful thing if it were. . . . He squinted, strained his eyes. There, surely, that was the milk-colored screen; those black spots were dials. He sprang to his feet, ran down the stairs, out the door, across the rock. . . . It was irrational; why should a transceiver appear just when he wanted it, as if in answer to his prayer? Of course it might be part of a cargo lost overboard. . . .

Sure enough, the mechanism was bolted to a raft of manasco

logs, and evidently had floated up the shelf on the high tide.

Perrin, unable to credit his good fortune, crouched beside the gray case. Brand new, with red seals across the master switch.

It was too heavy to carry. Perrin tore off the seals, threw on the power: here was a set he understood. The screen glowed bright.

Perrin dialled to the Commission band. The interior of an office appeared and facing out was, not the officious subordinate, but Superintendent Raymond Flint himself. Nothing could be better.

"Superintendent," cried out Perrin, "this is Isel Rock Lighthouse, Harold Perrin speaking."

"Oh, yes," said Superintendent Flint. "How are you, Perrin? What's the trouble?"

"My partner Andy Seguilo disappeared—vanished into nowhere; I'm alone out here."

Superintendent Flint looked shocked. "Disappeared? What happened? Did he fall into the ocean?"

"I don't know. He just disappeared. It happened last night—"

"You should have called in before," said Flint reprovingly. "I would have sent out a rescue copter to search for him."

"I tried to call," Perrin explained, "but I couldn't get the

regular transceiver to work. It burnt up on me. . . . I thought I was marooned here."

Superintendent Flint raised his eyebrows in mild curiosity. "Just what are you using now?"

Perrin stammered, "It's a brand new instrument—floated up out of the sea. Probably was lost from a barge."

Flint nodded. "Those barge-men are a careless lot—don't seem to understand what good equipment costs. . . . Well, you sit tight. I'll order a plane out in the morning with a relief crew. You'll be assigned to duty along the Floral Coast. How does that suit you?"

"Very well, sir," said Perrin. "Very well indeed. I can't think of anything I'd like better. . . . Isel Rock is beginning to get on my nerves."

"When the five moons rise, it's not wise to believe anything," said Superintendent Flint in a sepulchral voice.

The screen went dead.

Perrin lifted his hand, slowly turned off the power. A drop of rain fell in his face. He glanced skyward. The squall was almost on him. He tugged at the transceiver, although well aware that it was too heavy to move. In the store-room was a tarpaulin which would protect the transceiver until morning. The

relief crew could help him move it inside.

He ran back to the lighthouse, found the tarpaulin, hurried back outside. Where was the transceiver? . . . Ah—there. He ran through the pelting drops, wrapped the tarpaulin around the box, lashed it into place, ran back to the lighthouse. He barred the door, and whistling, opened a canned dinner unit.

The rain spun and slashed at the lighthouse. The twin shafts of white and red swept wildly around the sky. Perrin climbed into his bunk, lay warm and drowsy. . . . Seguilo's disappearance was a terrible thing, it would leave a scar on his mind. But it was over and done with. Put it behind him; look to the future. The Floral Coast. . . .

In the morning the sky was bare and clean. Maurnilam Var spread mirror-quiet as far as the eye could reach. Isel Rock lay naked to the sunlight. Looking out the window, Perrin saw a rumpled heap—the tarpaulin, the lashings. The transceiver, the manasco raft had disappeared utterly.

Perrin sat in the doorway. The sun climbed the sky. A dozen times he jumped to his feet, listening for the sound of engines. But no relief plane appeared.

The sun reached the zenith,

NO. 3

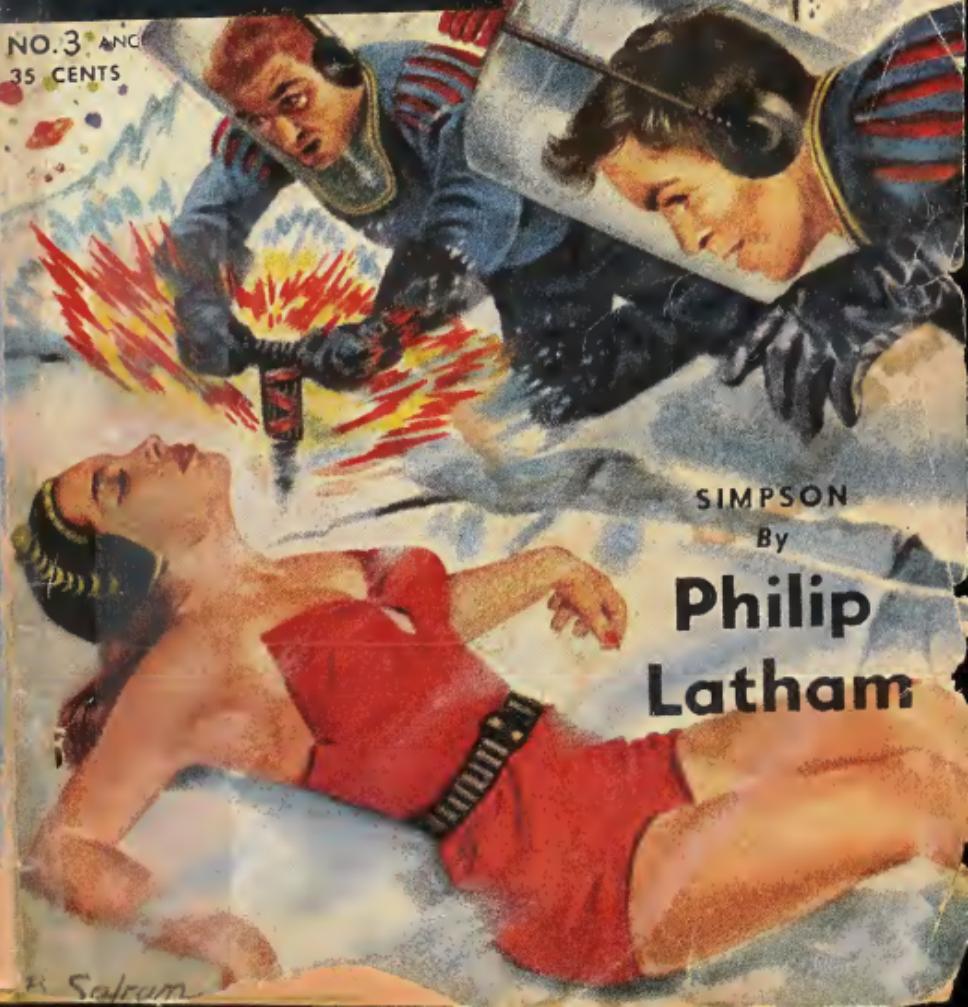
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35 CENTS



SIMPSON

By

**Philip
Latham**

A. Salton

verged westward. A barge drifted by, a mile from the rock. Perrin ran out on the shelf, shouting, waving his arms.

The lank red bargemen sprawled on the cargo stared curiously, made no move. The barge dwindled into the east.

Perrin returned to the doorstep, sat with his head in his hands. Chills and fever ran along his skin. There would be no relief plane. On Isel Rock he would remain, day in, day out, for eleven weeks.

Listlessly he climbed the steps to the commissary. There was no lack of food, he would never starve. But could he bear the solitude, the uncertainty? Seguilo going, coming, going. . . . The unsubstantial transceiver. . . . Who was responsible for these cruel jokes? The five moons rising together—was there some connection?

He found an almanac, carried it to the table. At the top of each page five white circles on a black strip represented the moons. A week ago they strung out at random. Four days ago Liad, the slowest, and Poidel, the fastest, were thirty degrees apart, with Ista, Bista and Miad between. Two nights ago the peripheries almost touched; last night they were even closer. Tonight they were even closer. Tonight Poidel bulged slightly out in front of Ista, tomorrow night

Liad lagged behind Bista. . . . But between the five moons and Seguilo's disappearance—where was the connection?

Gloomily Perrin ate his dinner. Magda settled into Maurnilam Var without display, a dull dusk settled over Isel Rock, water rose and sighed across the shelf.

Perrin turned on the light, barred the door. There would be no more hoping, no more wishing—no more believing. In eleven weeks the relief ship would convey him back to Spacetown; in the meantime he must make the best of the situation.

Through the window he saw the blue glow in the east; watched Poidel, Ista, Bista, Liad and Miad climb the sky. The tide came with the moons. Maurnilam Var was still calm and each moon laid a separate path of reflection along the water.

Perrin looked up into the sky, around the horizon. A beautiful lonesome sight. With Seguilo he sometimes had felt lonely, but never isolation such as this. Eleven weeks of solitude. . . . If he could select a companion—Perrin let his mind wander.

Into the moonlight a slim figure came walking, wearing tan breeches and a short-sleeved white sport shirt.

Perrin stared unable to move. The figure walked up to the door, rapped. The muffled sound came

up the staircase. "Hello, anybody home?" It was a clear girl's voice.

Perrin swung open the window, called hoarsely, "Go away!"

She moved back, turned up her face and the moonlight fell upon her features. Perrin's voice died in his throat; he felt his heart beating wildly.

"Go away?" she said in a soft puzzled voice. "I've no place to go. . . ."

"Who are you?" he asked. His voice sounded strange to his own ears—desperate, hopeful. After all, she was possible—even though almost impossibly beautiful. . . . She might have flown out from Spacetown. "How did you get here?"

She gestured at Maurnilam Var. "My plane went down about three miles out. I came over on the life-raft."

Perrin looked along the water's edge. The outline of a life-raft was barely visible.

The girl called up, "Are you going to let me in?"

Perrin stumbled down stairs. He halted at the door, one hand on the bolts, and the blood rushed in his ears.

An impatient tapping jarred his hand. "I'm freezing to death out here."

Perrin let the door swing back. She stood facing him, half-smiling. "You're a very cautious

lighthouse tender—or perhaps a woman-hater?"

Perrin searched her face, her eyes, the expression of her mouth. "Are you—real?"

She laughed, not at all offended. "Of course I'm real." She held out her hand. "Touch me." Perrin stared at her—the essence of night-flowers, soft silk, hot blood, sweetness, delightful fire. "Touch me," she repeated softly.

Perrin moved back uncertainly, and she came forward, into the lighthouse. "Can you call the shore?"

"No. . . . My transceiver is out of order."

She turned him a quick firefly look. "When is your next relief boat?"

"Eleven weeks."

"Eleven weeks!" She sighed a soft shallow sigh.

Perrin moved back another half-step. "How did you know I was alone?"

She seemed confused. "I didn't know. . . . Aren't lighthouse keepers always alone?"

"No."

She came a step closer. "You don't seem pleased to see me. Are you—a hermit?"

"No," said Perrin in a husky voice. "Quite the reverse. . . . But I can't quite get used to you. You're a—miracle. Too good to be true. Just now I was wishing

for someone—exactly like you. Exactly."

"And here I am."

Perrin moved uneasily. "What's your name?"

He knew what she would say before she spoke. "Sue."

"Sue what?" He tried to hold his mind vacant.

"Oh—just Sue. Isn't that enough?"

Perrin felt the skin of his face tighten. "Where is your home?"

She looked vaguely over her shoulder. Perrin held his mind blank, but the word came through.

"Hell."

Perrin's breath came hard and sharp.

"And what is Hell like?"

"It is—cold and dark."

Perrin stepped back. "Go away. Go away." His vision blurred; her face melted as if tears had come across his eyes.

"Where will I go?"

"Back where you came from."

"But—" forlornly—"there is nowhere but Maurnilam Var. And up here. . . ." She stopped short, took a swift step forward, stood looking up into his face. He could feel the warmth of her body. "Are you afraid of me?"

Perrin wrenched his eyes from her face. "You're not real. You're something which takes the shape of my thoughts. Perhaps you killed Seguilo. . . .

I don't know what you are. But you're not real."

"Not real? Of course I'm real. Touch me. Feel my arm." Perrin backed away. She said passionately, "Here, a knife, if you are of a mind, cut me; you will see blood. Cut deeper—you will find bone."

"What would happen," said Perrin, "if I drove the knife into your heart?"

She said nothing, staring at him with big eyes.

"Why do you come here?" cried Perrin. She looked away, back toward the water.

"It's magic . . . Darkness . . ." The words were a mumbled confusion; Perrin suddenly realized that the same words were in his own mind. Had she merely parroted his thoughts during the entire conversation? "Then comes a slow pull," she said. "I drift, I crave the air, the moons bring me up. . . . I do anything to hold my place in the air. . . ."

"Speak your own words," said Perrin harshly. "I know you're not real—but where is Seguilo?"

"Seguilo?" She reached a hand behind her head, touched her hair, smiled sleepily at Perrin. Real or not, Perrin's pulse thudded in his ears. Real or not. . . .

"I am no dream," she said. "I'm real. . . ." She came slowly

toward Perrin, feeling his thoughts, face arch, ready.

Perrin said in a strangled gasp, "No, no. Go away. *Go away!*"

She stopped short, looked at him through eyes suddenly opaque. "Very well. I will go now—"

"Now! Forever!"

"—but perhaps you will call me back. . . ."

She walked slowly through the door. Perrin ran to the window, watched the slim shape blur into the moonlight. She went to the edge of the shelf; here she paused. Perrin felt a sudden intolerable pang; what was he casting away? Real or not, she was what he wanted her to be; she was identical to reality. . . . He leaned forward to call, "Come back—whatever you are—" He restrained himself. When he looked again she was gone. . . . Why was she gone? Perrin pondered, looking across the moonlit sea. He had wanted her. . . . He had wanted her, but he no longer believed in her. . . . He had believed in the shape called Seguilo; he had believed in the transceiver—and both had slavishly obeyed his expectations. So had the girl, and he had sent her away. . . . Rightly too, he told himself regretfully. Who knows what she might become when his back was turned. . . .

When dawn finally came, it brought a new curtain of overcast. Blue-green Magda glimmered dull and sultry as a moldy orange. The water shone like oil.

. . . Movement in the west—a Panapa chieftain's private barge, walking across the horizon like a water-spider. Perrin vaulted the stairs to the light-room, swung the lumenifer full at the barge, despatched an erratic series of flashes.

The barge moved on, jointed oars swinging rhythmically in and out of the water. A torn banner of fog drifted across the water. The barge became a dark jerking shape, disappeared.

Perrin went to Seguilo's old transceiver, sat looking at it. He jumped to his feet, pulled the chassis out of the case, disassembled the entire circuit.

He saw scorched metal, wires fused into droplets, cracked ceramics. He pushed the tangle into a corner, went to stand by the window.

The sun was at the zenith, the sky was the color of green grapes. The sea heaved sluggishly, great amorphous swells rising and falling without apparent direction. Now was low tide; the shelf shouldered high up, the black rock showing naked and strange. The sea palpitated, up, down, up, down, sucking noisily at bits of sea-wrack.

Perrin descended the stairs. On his way down he looked in at the bathroom mirror, and his face stared back at him, pale, wide-eyed, cheeks hollow and lusterless.

The face disappeared with the door's edge. Perrin continued down the stairs, stepped out into the sunlight.

Carefully he walked out on the shelf, looked in a kind of fascination down over the edge. The heave of the swells distorted his vision; he could see little more than shadows and shifting fingers of light.

Step by step he wandered along the shelf. The sun leaned to the west. Perrin retreated up the rock.

At the lighthouse he seated himself in the doorway. Tonight the door remained barred. No inducement could persuade him to open up; the most entrancing visions would beseech him in vain. His thoughts went to Seguilo. What had Seguilo believed, what being had he fabricated out of his morbid fancy with the power and malice to drag him away? . . . It seemed that every man was victim to his own imaginings. Isel Rock was not the place for a fanciful man when the five moons rose together.

Tonight he would bar the door, he would bed himself

down and sleep, secure both in the barrier of welded metal and his own unconsciousness.

The sun sank in a bank of heavy vapor. North, east, south flushed with violet; the west glowed lime and dark green, dulling quickly through tones of brown. Perrin entered the lighthouse, bolted the door, set the twin shafts of red and white circling the horizon.

He opened a dinner unit, ate listlessly. Outside was dark night, emptiness to all the horizons. As the tide rose, the water hissed and moaned across the shelf.

Perrin lay in his bed, but sleep was far away. Through the window came an electric glow, then up rose the five moons, shining through a high overcast as if wrapped in blue gauze.

Perrin heaved fitfully. There was nothing to fear, he was safe in the lighthouse. No human hands could force the door; it would take the strength of a mastodon, the talons of a rock choundril, the ferocity of a Maldene land-shark. . . .

He elbowed himself up on his bunk. . . . A sound from outside? He peered through the window, heart in his mouth. A tall shape, indistinct. As he watched, it slouched toward the lighthouse—as he knew it would.

"No, no," cried Perrin softly. He flung himself into his bunk,

covered his head in the blankets. "It's only what I think up myself, it's not real. . . . Go away," he whispered fiercely. "Go away." He listened. It must be near the door now. It would be lifting a heavy arm, the talons would glint in the moonlight.

"No, no," cried Perrin. "There's nothing there. . . ." He held up his head and listened.

A rattle, a rasp at the door. A thud as a great mass tested the lock.

"Go away!" screamed Perrin. "You're not real!"

The door groaned, the bolts sagged.

Perrin stood at the head of the stairs, breathing heavily through his mouth. The door would slam back in another instant. He knew what he would see: a black shape tall and round as a pole with eyes like coach-lamps. Perrin even knew the last sound his ears would hear—a terrible grinding discord. . . .

The top bolt snapped, the door reeled. A huge black arm shoved inside. Perrin saw the talons gleam as the fingers reached for the bolt.

His eyes flickered around the lighthouse for a weapon . . . only a wrench, a table-knife.

The bottom bolt shattered, the door twisted. Perrin stood staring, his mind congealed. A thought rose up from some hid-

den survival-node. Here, Perrin thought, was the single chance.

He ran back into his room. Behind him the door clattered, he heard heavy steps. He looked around the room. His shoe.

Thud! Up the stairs, and the lighthouse vibrated. Perrin's fancy explored the horrible, he knew what he would hear. And so came a voice—harsh, empty, but like another voice which had been sweet. "I told you I'd be back."

Thud—thud—up the stairs. Perrin took the shoe by the toe, swung, struck the side of his head.

Perrin stumbled to the wall, supported himself. Presently he groped a way to his bunk, sat down.

Outside there was still dark night. Grunting, he looked out the window into the sky. The five moons hung far away in the west. Already Poidel ranged ahead, while Liad trailed behind.

Tomorrow night the five moons would rise apart.

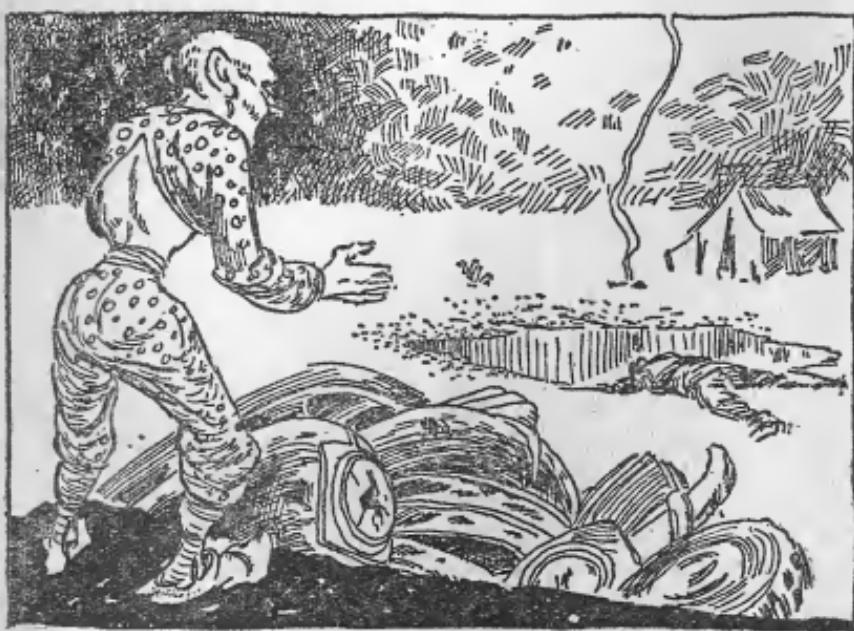
Tomorrow night there would be no high tides, sucking and tremulous along the shelf.

Tomorrow night the moons would call up no yearning shapes from the streaming dark.

Eleven weeks to relief. Perrin gingerly felt the side of his head. . . . Quite a respectable lump.

HOMECOMING

By IRVING COX, JR.



QUINT was able to see her for a moment before he left. Her eyes were radiant with pride, because she had already heard the rumors of his appointment. They met in the sheltered formal gardens of the Council Center, where metal trellises and tropical vines towered hundreds of feet above them, arching in a complex pattern across the face of the blazing sun.

"Parla, the Council voted me full rank as acting-Delegate!" He showed her the new, yellow rectangle fused into the plastic material of his sleeve. "I'm authorized to negotiate the agreement."

"Your first mission, Quint! And they're allowing you to use the new radal-cruiser."

She reached for his hand and held it shyly. It was a shocking

breach of traditional form, for Parla was the daughter of the Korbinian Council Delegate and Quint was only an Expediter, First Class, in the Interplanetary Assistance Corps. In spite of his brilliant reputation and achievements, Quint had risen as far as possible in Council service, unless he could earn a merit promotion by making an outstanding contribution to the progress of the Alliance. A yawning social gulf stood between him and Parla; in the ancient slang, Parla was a nyawker, Quint an ick. But they were in love; and it is always the persistent hope of young love that no miracle is impossible.

"If you succeed, Quint, we—we—" Her voice choked with the heady pleasure of anticipation.

"I'll bring back an agreement, Parla," he promised confidentially. "We're reasonably certain that intelligent beings inhabit Dodai. It may be a race like ours, or it may be very different; but that doesn't matter. They're rational, thinking people, technologically only a little inferior to us, since they haven't discovered space travel. Naturally they'll be overjoyed to share our ways and our ideas, just as we're anxious to learn theirs."

"Of course, Quint—when they understand." She pursed her lips.

"But isn't that the difficulty? They may be very backward. You might frighten them terribly, before you have a chance to negotiate."

"That's why the Council is permitting me to make contact in my own way, after we reach Dodai."

She held his hand tight, and looked into his eyes. "Don't make any mistakes, Quint! When Dodai joins the Alliance, the Council will vote you permanent rank as Delegate. I know I'm selfish to think of this only in terms of you and me, but it's the only way, Quint, and—and I love you very much."

The voice of the space field dispatcher broke in on her, from the amplifier artfully concealed in the trellis above them.

"Expediter Quint! Expediter Quint! Your flight is cleared."

He turned to go, and Parla broke another social tradition. She reached up and kissed him, her lips lingering softly on his while sudden tears gleamed in her eyes.

Quint's radal-cruiser was the first ship of its kind built by Alliance scientists. It was still an experimental craft, and one reason for the expedition to Dodai was to test the new radal power units under actual flight conditions. It was a massive, ovoidal shape, dwarfing the smaller

spaceships ordinarily used for interplanetary travel. Christened the Rad-I, it was surfaced with an opaque, milky-gray metal, which was an essential part in the radal power cycle.

The Rad-I had no crew; Quint himself had full command of the complex mechanisms of the ship from the navigational panel in the central control room. But there were three other members of the expedition, one from the Alliance Astrographical Society, another from the United Biological Organization, and the third representing the Council Physicists Association which had developed the radal motor.

Since Quint commanded the Expo-mission, he had selected the other members of the party himself, but as a matter of course he had relied entirely upon the Council Classifier. It was customary to feed the complex of probable qualifications into the tabulator and to allow the machine to turn up the exact name of the most suitable individual, selected from the billions of records on file in the central archives. Quint himself had been chosen in the same way by the Council.

Quint had not met any of his companions before he went aboard the radal-cruiser. Like Parla, they were nyawkers. The term had never been legitima-

tized by inclusion in the Alliance lexicon; handed down for generations, its origin was lost in the obscurity of the prehistoric Other Time of Quint's people. Anyone reared on the older planets, close to the throbbing centers of culture, was called a nyawker; it was a synonym for culture, refinement, comfort, education, sophistication. Quint was referred to as an ick, because he came from a new, rough, frontier colony. He had pulled himself up by his bootstraps to the rank of Expediter. His manner was still sometimes blunt and a little crude. It was, perhaps, that very quality which made him attractive to Parla.

In spite of his background, Quint had been chosen to command the Expo-mission to Dodai. Conceivably, there could have been a great deal of friction between him and the three nyawkers who went with him, but it was inevitable that they would get along well and work smoothly together, since compatibility of personality traits was a big factor in the Classifier selections. Actually, for much of the trip, they saw little of each other. The numerous compartments of the huge radal-cruiser were cluttered with hundreds of analytical machines, specialized calculators, and Researchers. Each of the men was absorbed with

the accumulation of space data that applied to his own area of specialization.

Although the Alliance had enjoyed space travel for centuries, they had been restricted to the planets of their own sun system by the ultimate limitations of their motive power. Now, with the radal-cruiser, they were reaching out into the unexplored vastness of the Galaxy.

To understand the universe was an obsession and a passion with Quint's people. Quint felt the mystic, inner drive himself, as he sat in the control compartment of the Rad-I. The Alliance had been formed by a vigorous, intensely curious and creative people, in many ways strangely adolescent in their enduring, enthusiastic joy in discovery and exploration. To them the generalizations of formulae derived from the mathematical assumptions of exact science were commonplace. But they had no interest in the less precise sociological philosophies. Thus, while the Alliance scientists developed radal power, harnessed to the radiating light waves moving through space, traditional customs so ruled their society that Quint could not marry Parla until he earned a rank equal to hers. He chafed under the restriction, yet never questioned its justice.

The billions of people inhabiting the separate planets of the Alliance were united by their fever for exploration. Gradually their dreams had crystallized into two fundamental drives: first, they must find a way of breaking out of their own sun system to examine the rest of the universe; and, secondly, they wanted to contact another rational people, different from themselves, and share their exciting accumulation of knowledge and experience.

Long before the radal power was discovered, the planet of Dodai had been discovered by Professor Dodai, of the Alliance Astrographical Society, and named after him. Using the new Astrotelescope, he had postulated that some form of highly developed rational life existed on Dodai. The Astrographical Society had tried to communicate with the distant world, but apparently none of their messages had reached across the void of space, for Dodai had never responded.

Now it was up to Quint to make a physical contact with Dodai. He knew that he carried the hopes and the dreams of his people with him. He dared not fail.

The Rad-I swung in an elliptic course around the globe of Dodai, just above the tropo-

phere. Quint called his companions together in the control compartment, to plan the details of their landing.

"The atmosphere isn't very different from our own," the physicist contributed. "I've made the Calex test twice, to be sure. Slightly less oxygen than we're accustomed to, but enough."

The astrographer said: "Only this morning I observed a number of cities, which indicate a mature civilization. They are built like ours; I doubt if the people will be very different."

"It's reasonable to assume they have developed a way of communication by one or more of the radiant waves," the physicist guessed. "If we could record and classify the impulses, we might be able to discover the pattern of their language."

"We should land secretly," Quint decided, "as close to one of their cities as possible. That will give us time to study their world, and to adjust ourselves to the variations in atmospheric structure."

Under cover of darkness, Quint brought the Rad-I closer to the surface of Dodai. On the land mass below them, the astroscreen picked out the clear reflection of crowded cities, networks of gleaming highways, and cultivated farmland. The radar-cruiser passed over a body of

water and hovered above another mass of land. Quint saw no cities and roads there, but instead an inexplicable phenomenon of splattering, disorganized energy masses.

Thirteen miles above the confusion Quint brought the cruiser to a stop, centering the astro-screen upon the continent below and bringing in an enlargement at the maximum ratio. The members of the Expo-mission crowded around the screen, studying the weird activity.

They saw hundreds of strange machines, which seemed to be variants of one basic design—a pipe-like cylinder erected upon a sturdy base and directed at an angle toward the sky. Periodically from the mouth of this instrument a projectile was hurled, in a cloud of smoke and dust. When this projectile struck the ground, the sudden dispersal of energy was violent and destructive. Shadowy beings, indistinct in the darkness, manned the machines; in scattered groups, they were deliberately aiming the explosive destruction at each other.

The representative of the United Biological Organization said, "They're men, I think—like ourselves."

"But they're using machines to slay each other!" the physicist cried. "It's incomprehensible. Their cities and highways in-

dicate an intelligent and rational people, far beyond such primitive savagery."

"There's no logic to it—nothing we can understand," Quint agreed slowly, but he spoke without conviction. Sensitive to the mystic dreams of his people, he was quick to respond to the quality of strong emotion involved here. He felt an icy fear, but he could not define it specifically, nor explain its cause.

"Perhaps a Researcher can turn up an explanation," the astrographer suggested.

Quint wheeled a Researching machine before the astroscreen and tabbed the image directly into the calculator. For a moment the tubes glowed and the rays hummed gently through the liquid memory tank; and then, in a blinding flash of light, the control table of the Researcher burst, the tubes exploded, and the machine lay smashed and silent.

The physicist was the first to break the deathly quiet.

"It broke an inhibitor," he whispered.

"Not one," Quint said mechanically. "The entire relay, I think." With the toe of his boot he began to push the pieces of the Researcher into a pile. "This—this thing down there—it must be the Prohibition. I've never known before what it was."

"Do you now?" the physicist asked. "Something in our own past has been driven out of the memory of our people artificially, with the hypnotics we administer at birth. We shut off all possibility of rediscovering it, by the relay inhibitions built into our Researching machines. But how could our Prohibition be related to this madness on Dodai?"

"We have no right to ask," the biologist declared weakly. "Our Prohibition was an evil thing, a chain on the progress of civilization. We have freed ourselves by eliminating it. In that case—"

"In that case," the astrographer took up the thought in the brief silence, "we cannot land on Dodai. We must return and tell the Council that our mission has failed."

"When we have come so close?" the physicist asked, his voice bitter with disappointment. He began to pace the floor, his heavy boots crunching on the broken tubes of the Researcher. "No! We must try to make an agreement with Dodai, bring the new planet into the Alliance. The promotion to Delegate rank means too much to all of us." He paused again, clenching his fists. "Look at it this way: the Researcher is a mechanical thing; the relays are mechanical. There is no real relationship between

Dodai and our Prohibition, but possibly a resemblance of some sort, just enough to trip the wrong response in the memory tank."

"You're obviously right," the biologist said eagerly. "And I am anxious to catalogue the new life forms here; perhaps—" He paused and looked at Quint. "But it's up to Quint to make the decision; he's in command."

While the three watched him hopefully, Quint turned back and looked at the astroscreen. Again he felt the nameless terror; but the memory of Parla filled his mind, warping the function of logic. There was nothing else to do; he would never have another chance to win a merit promotion.

Silently he went to the controls and twisted the dials; the gigantic cruiser began to vibrate gently with the whirling of its motors. "Back on that other continent," he said, "near one of the coastal cities, I noticed an area that seemed deserted. I think we can make our landing there."

The others crowded around him, shaking his hand and clapping him on the back with unaffected joy.

Quint brought the radial cruiser down in a wide, flat, desert valley rimmed with distant hills. He surveyed the area care-

fully first and found it empty, yet within an easy distance of a sprawling, port city.

As the exit-way slid down toward the rocky Earth, the air of Dodai hissed into the compartments of the cruiser. It was cold and heavy and imperceptibly acrid. They were shortly able to tolerate it, but at first it burned their eyes and lungs, provoking dry, wracking coughs. The physicist used one of his sensitive Expo-recorders to analyze the air, with curious results.

"There is a definite percentage of partly consumed fuel particles," he told Quint. "The impregnation is probably much heavier in the populated centers."

"Then the Dodaians use oil and coal, as we do," Quint decided.

"But such waste! They must have no reason to practice conservation, or their atmosphere would be as clean as ours."

"There is no such thing as an unlimited natural fuel; more probably, they simply haven't learned how to make a Conservator. That's one of the things we can show them, after they join the Alliance."

Shaking his head, the physicist examined the Expo-recorder tape again. "Some of the atmospheric particles are unstable radiants, artificially created. That means Dodai understands and uses the

basic energy components of elemental matter. But if their culture has advanced so far, why haven't they attempted space travel?"

The fear suddenly gripped Quint again when he asked, "Do you suppose the explosions we saw—"

"Nonsense!" the physicist cut in, as if he were afraid to hear the thought spoken. "Why should they direct any force so deadly as radiant energy at each other? What purpose would they have?"

Before dawn they unloaded a number of specialized Expo-recorders from the cruiser. A small area of the valley floor became a bedlam of clicking and gyrating machines, analyzing, cataloguing, and tentatively generalizing upon available data. One instrument probed into the nearby city, on captive light rays. Another picked up the language of the Dodaians and began the laborious sorting of sound into probability patterns. More exhaustive analysis of the air itself filled in an outline of the technological mechanics developed on the planet.

As the sun arose, the desert air warmed quickly. Quint found it easier to work in the mounting heat. Slowly he became used to the difference in gravitational pull. By conscientiously restraining his muscles, he no longer

leaped ridiculously into the air when he attempted to take a normal step.

Such adjustments were customary. In ordinary interplanetary travel among the planets of the Alliance, Quint had learned to acclimate himself quickly to environmental changes. As an ick, he had grown up on the largest and coldest planet in his system, helping his father and his uncles to farm their vast grain plantation, laid out in the shadow of a towering mountain range, which was always covered with gleaming banks of snow. After he had become a member of the Interplanetary Assistance Corps, every assignment he took meant that he had to make bodily adjustment to strikingly different conditions on other inhabited planets.

On Dodai, however, the anticipated ease of mind did not follow the physical acclimation. Quint felt restless and nervous. He kept pacing the rocky desert and scanning the sky—for what, he did not know. When he tried to analyze his motivation, the action seemed to be instinctive, a fear-response that had always been present in his mind but never previously recognized. When nightfall came, Quint felt an intense relief; the darkness somehow seemed to lessen the fear.

The members of the expedition brought lights out from the cruiser, and sat in a circle around a comfortable meal, pleasantly comparing notes on the day's accumulation of data. Only the biologist seemed puzzled and uneasy. Exploring in a widening circle, with the cruiser as its center, he had found many specimens of desert plant life which he had carefully preserved. But his prize find was a small animal, still alive. As an experiment, he said, he had subjected it to the Communicator.

"Let me explain the function of the machine," he went on. "After sealing two receptors against the frontal lobe of your own skull, you clamp a transmission band around the brain case of your subject, and the direct communication of concepts is theoretically possible without the use of language symbols."

The physicist examined the device with interest. "I've never seen anything like it," he said.

"I shouldn't wonder. I don't suppose one has been built in the Alliance for centuries; we have no need for it. I found the design in a very old manuscript, dating back to that prehistoric Other Time of our past. I asked the laboratory to make this model, because I thought it might prove useful for communicating

with the people of Dodai, if we failed to break down the symbology of their language."

"And you used this on the Dodaian animal?"

"Just from curiosity, but the results—well, decide for yourselves."

The biologist tenderly brought a small animal from its cage, fastening the metal band to its head. The members of the expedition took up pairs of receptors and fixed the seals to their foreheads, while the biologist adjusted the dials of the transmission machine.

As soon as the yellow tubes glowed, Quint felt a pulsing shock of terror, so intense that it nearly disorganized his ability to conceive integrated thought. Like a recurring lightning flash in the black storm of fear, was a single, unwavering drive—to run and hide from all men. He smashed the seals and tore himself free of the Communicator.

"All animals, I dare say, live in constant fear," the biologist said apologetically, by way of tentative explanation, "but somehow I wouldn't have visualized it as having quite this particular quality. And it's strange, don't you think, that the object of the fear seems to be only man himself?"

All the variety of complex analyzers which the expedition

had brought to Dodai had functioned admirably throughout the day, except for the machine which had been charting the probable language pattern. It had ground through reels of tape and produced not even an hypothetical generalization.

After they had finished eating that evening, they gathered around the machine, watching it. The physicist guessed that the data was as yet too incomplete for any theory to emerge, but the astrographer was convinced that the quantity of data ruled out that possibility. He proposed running some of the completed tapes through a Researcher, on the chance that sound similarities with Quint's language might evoke a key generalization from the memory tank.

But a disturbing thing happened. As Quint tabbed the tape into a Researcher, the tubes glowed and shattered again, in a blaze of splashing light.

Early the next morning the biologist took his Communicator and wandered off into the blue mists shrouding the desert floor, in quest of other animal specimens. With daylight Quint's indefinable tension began again. He asked the biologist not to go out of sight of the ship, but the biologist discounted the warning and Quint saw no way to make it a direct order.

While the others worked with their machines, Quint climbed to the top of the radial-cruiser and began to scan the sky again. He felt oddly naked, as if he should have had some sort of a thing with him to protect himself. On the face of it, such an idea was absurd. Quint had never felt the need for an instrument of personal defense before. Except for the paralyzer fences used to control certain jungle animals, no such devices existed anywhere in the Alliance.

Suddenly, in mid-morning, Quint heard the noise of a primitive motor in the sky. Shielding his eyes, he looked up and located a winged craft, a variant of a basic glider design. The machine soared in a circle over the Rad-I. Quint knew that a Dodaian native had at last discovered them, and he attempted to signal with his arms.

The machine darted toward the cruiser, dropping a long, sleek projectile which struck the ship and exploded. No more harm was done than that caused by collision with a tiny meteorite in space.

As the ship wheeled around and fled, Quint understood quite clearly the pilot's reaction. Frightened when he saw the massive air cruiser lying on the desert, he had tried to destroy it or drive it away, with one of the

protective instruments developed by the Dodaians. Having failed, he would return to his base and spread his irrational fear to his people.

No initial contact with Dodai could have been more unfortunate. Quint had had no opportunity to explain his mission; and he was dangerously close to failure. To head off a further misunderstanding, he must immediately move the cruiser to another place, where the Expo-mission could complete its study of the Dodaians and later renew contact more propitiously.

Quint bawled orders to the physicist and the astrographer, who began to move their analyzing machines back into the cruiser. Quint himself ran across the desert to find the biologist. Beyond a low, sloping hill of sun-heated rock he came upon a hidden gorge. The biologist was in its depths, on the bank of a small, stagnant pool of greenish water. Crooked, heavily needled plant life towered over the water, so that Quint did not see the strange Dodaian machine until he stood directly in front of it.

It was a four-wheeled surface car, roofless, very old and scarred. Beside it was a temporary cloth shelter, held up by poles and cords. Around a dying fire were empty, scattered containers, which may originally

have held food. But Quint observed all that only subconsciously, as an unpleasantly vivid background for the person lying, grotesquely twisted, on the bank of the stagnant pool.

Unmistakably he was a Dodaian. And he was just as unmistakably dead.

When the biologist saw Quint, he sprang to his feet, guiltily jerking free the Communicator band which had been bound to the Dodaian.

"What happened?" Quint asked.

"Nothing!" The biologist's voice was shrill with emotion.

"Was he dead when you found him?"

The biologist drew himself up with a kind of weird dignity and answered through clenched teeth, "I don't have to answer questions from you—not from you!"

The response was so bitterly venomous, so ridiculously illogical, Quint was speechless. The only explanation that occurred to him was that the biologist had suffered a violent shock. Only time and understanding would restore his normal stability.

"We've been sighted by a Dodaian aircraft," Quint said evenly. "We'll have to move the cruiser immediately." He began to pick up the biologist's racks of specimen cases. "Let me help

you carry your things back to the ship."

The biologist snatched the racks from him. "Don't touch my things!" he hissed with loathing. "Don't come near me!"

Shrugging his shoulders, Quint turned away and walked out of the gorge. The biologist followed him, after he had gathered his paraphernalia into a pack and strapped it to his shoulders. They walked across the desert together, in silence. As they came within sight of the cruiser, the biologist asked coldly,

"You intend to report this, of course?"

"Our instructions are to—"

"Oh, yes, follow your orders to the letter—that's the way people like you always climb to the top. For the sake of the record, don't imply that I killed him."

Quint was genuinely surprised. "I know you didn't; none of us would; it's not our way!"

For some reason, this amused the biologist tremendously. His brief spasm of laughter was almost hysterical. Then he said,

"I found him camping in the gorge. I attempted to talk, but none of the regular signs worked, and he seemed afraid of me. Then I thought of using the Communicator. I showed it to him, but he tried to run away. I didn't want to bungle this op-

portunity to make a contact with them, so I caught him and held him just long enough to fix the band on his head."

"You were careful?"

"He simply went unconscious when I touched him. I laid him on the ground, and he opened his eyes. I thought the Communicator would calm his fear, and it did, I'm sure. But suddenly he began to writhe, and he died before I could do anything for him."

"Were you able to learn any of the fundamental concepts of Dodaian society?" Quint inquired eagerly.

The biologist spat out his answer furiously. "No! Absolutely none!" After a pause, he added more quietly, "Some little of their language; but nothing else."

"It's a pity he died, but his death will help us, I think. You've learned that the Dodaians are a delicate, sensitive people. We'll have to plan our approach to them carefully, to avoid all connotation of fear in the future." Impulsively Quint reached out for the biologist's hand. "You mustn't blame yourself," he said.

The biologist shrank from him, his lips drawing back from his teeth in a snarl. "Don't touch me!"

The astrographer and the

physicist had carried their own Expo-recorders and analyzing machines back into the cruiser. As the biologist and Quint rejoined them, they volunteered, as a matter of course, to help the biologist move his equipment. But he rejected them scornfully, with the same kind of loathing that he directed at Quint. And almost at once he became involved in a bitter argument with the physicist, by peremptorily demanding the full use of a compartment which they had previously shared.

For the first time since the Expo-mission had left the Alliance, Quint had to use his authority as commander of the expedition. The decision wasn't easy, for the biologist was clearly in the wrong; yet he was just as clearly suffering from a severe emotional disturbance. Quint asked the physicist to move out, and he did so without protest.

But the biologist wasn't satisfied. He asked for the use of additional power units, which were needed by the astrographer. Quint drew the line at that, and the biologist sneered haughtily,

"Your kind always stick together, don't they, Quint?"

Because of the discord, the smooth-running co-operation of the expedition vanished. The four men were still outside the cruiser, preparing for their de-

parture, when the Dodaians arrived.

The vanguard was led by a column of heavily armored vehicles that snaked across the desert in a cloud of swirling dust. Behind them came huge, open-topped surface cars that disgorged scores of Dodaians, all identically dressed in unattractively plain, brown costumes, and wearing semi-spherical metal hats.

The armored cars formed a circle around the cruiser, the men grouping themselves in the intervening gaps. They carried long, metallic tubes, which they held smartly on their shoulders. Quint guessed that the tube was an insignia of rank, like the yellow rectangle he wore on his own sleeve.

Some of the Dodaians made haste to set up queer, three-legged, metal cylinders, all pointed at the Rad-I. Similar cylinders projected from blisters atop the armored vehicles. When the arrangement seemed complete to the satisfaction of the Dodaians, silence fell on the desert, and the clouds of dust began to settle.

Quint and the biologist were standing on the incline of the exit-way of the cruiser, the physicist and astrographer on the ground in front of them, some distance from the ship. Quint

tried to analyze the purpose of the Dodaians facing him. As a welcome, the display was bewildering. A tenuous fear flitted in and out of his mind, but he was too consciously preoccupied with the objective of his mission to heed it.

A rasping, meaningless voice screamed at them from one of the armored cars. Quint knew the appropriate gestures, and began to make them, speaking softly in his own tongue. But the voice broke in on him, shrilly imperious.

Suddenly the biologist standing beside him threw Quint a look of triumph and spoke to the Dodaians in their own language. Apparently he had learned considerably more from the man in the gorge than he had admitted. Quint couldn't understand any reason for the biologist's secretiveness, but it didn't matter; the knowledge of Dodaian semantics should be of inestimable value now.

But as the dialogue went on, the biologist's triumph faded and his face twisted with fear. He shot a curt, quick sentence at the men assembled below, and turned to flee into the cruiser. At the same time an explosion rocked one of the armored cars, and a projectile struck the side of the cruiser. Immediately the Dodaians lowered their metal

tubes, pointing them at the members of Quint's expedition. There was a storm of tiny explosions, and a rain of metal rattled against the Rad-I.

In that flash of fire, Quint lost every rational idea save one. He was possessed and driven by terror, identical with the terror he had felt the night before when he applied the Communicator to the captured desert animal. A hot flame stabbed the flesh of his arm. He ran up the incline into the cruiser, the biologist tumbling ahead of him.

Clutching his arm in a vain effort to stem the spurting blood, Quint jammed his body against the control lever and the exit-way slid closed. Hundreds of exploding projectiles burst against the sides of the cruiser. Even though Quint knew no damage could be done, he was unable to shake off his clutching terror. It was as if the Communicator had transferred, intact, into his mind the emotive pattern of the captured desert animal. The stimulus that set it off was the sight and sound of the metal tubes in the hands of the Dodaians.

The biologist was trapped by the same fright, but it seemed to paralyze him, pound him into weeping hysteria. He had collapsed in a corner of the entry lock, and he was futilely trying to claw his way through the

metal wall. Quint knew he could expect no help from him; the biologist's degeneration was complete.

Slowly Quint pushed back his terror. He knew he must go into the control room and start the motors. Still holding his bleeding arm, he staggered weakly up the arterial corridor and dropped into the cushioned pilot's seat. Just before he worked the dials, he glanced at the ground-screen.

The astrographer and the physicist were surrounded by Dodaians, and the astrographer seemed to be mortally hurt; perhaps he was already dead. A woven net was being drawn around the struggling physicist, and his captors were beginning to drag him toward an armored car.

Trembling, Quint turned the dials; in his terror, he could think only of flight, and he directed full power into all motive units. The wrenching acceleration was unnecessarily violent. For a moment Quint lost consciousness.

When his mind cleared, the fear was gone. The Rad-I was streaking through space, miles above the stratosphere of Dodai. Quint adjusted the cruiser to a stable orbit. He cleansed the wound torn in his arm and sealed it with the cell-creating plastic gelatin.

He found the biologist still unconscious in the entry lock, and carried him tenderly to his sleeping compartment, where Quint treated the bleeding lacerations in both his legs. A flattened slug of metal was lodged in the muscle, close to the bone, but when Quint tried to remove it, the biologist opened his eyes and resisted.

"Leave me alone!" he whispered tensely. "Don't touch me!"

Sadly and quietly Quint held the biologist pressed against the cushion while he administered a hypnotic. As soon as he slept, Quint cut out the ugly fragment and sealed the wounds with the plastic gelatin.

Quint went back to the control compartment to take stock of the situation. He was ashamed of the fear and cowardice he had shown in running from the Dodaians. He had never before known such terror, but he understood why it had happened. The Communicator transferred concepts from mind to mind, without intervening verbalization. Thus, Quint had understood the fear of the Dodaian desert animal from that animal's point of view. The animal reacted instinctively, rather than rationally, to the thing it feared, and Quint had done the same when he faced the same stimulus.

Carrying the idea farther, it

meant that the biologist was responding with a point of view which he had absorbed when he used the Communicator on a native Dodaian. His present aversion, loathing, and bitterness were basic to the Dodaian mental pattern. Vaguely Quint speculated that the stimulus for that was the century-old Alliance Prohibition, something long buried in the prehistoric Other Time, and artificially wiped from their racial memory by the hypnotics administered at birth. Whatever it was, the stimulus for Quint's people was identical with that on Dodai.

His ultimate conclusion was inescapable: Quint dared not carry through an agreement with Dodai. It meant losing his promotion, losing Parla; but it was the price he would have to pay.

He must rescue the physicist and the astrographer and take them home to report the failure of their mission. Further, the report must be so finally discouraging that no other Expo-mission would ever be sent to contact the people of Dodai.

It was easy enough to locate the physicist. The yellow insignia which the members of the expedition wore on their sleeves was activated by body heat to receive and transmit tracer impulses sent from the cruiser. It

was an ordinary precaution taken by all Expo-missions, since scientists had a habit of losing themselves in the unexplored wonders of new worlds.

But only the physicist's insignia responded. As Quint had previously surmised, the astrographer had died when they were captured. The physicist had been taken not to the port city near the desert, but across the land mass to a larger city on the opposite coast. Hovering as low as he dared over the city, Quint dialed the astroscreen up to its highest ratio of enlargement. At such a distance the electronic picture was at best fuzzy and inaccurate, but it seemed to indicate that the physicist had been taken into a parklike area and imprisoned in some sort of a metal-walled house.

Quint knew the Dodaians would resist any attempt at rescue with the noisy, deadly explosives they used so freely. How was he to go among them, to release the physicist, without being killed himself? He tabbed the problem into a Researcher, and the machine gave him the answer in the form of a schematic plan for a specially charged webbing which he was to wear beneath his plastic uniform. Quint's knowledge of science was general, rather than specific, and he was not certain how the

webbing would function, except that it would encase him in an artificial magnetic field which would deflect any metal object approaching it.

Quint was entirely capable of building according to the diagram, and there was ample material aboard the Rad-I which could be converted to the purpose. But it was slow work. Dodai turned thrice on its axis before the rigid webbing and its power unit were completed.

The biologist recovered quickly, at least in a physical sense. He was clearly trying to conquer the crawling revulsion he felt whenever he was near Quint. He tried to be friendly, to chat pleasantly, but the effort was a miserable failure. Quint saw that it drove the biologist almost to the point of nausea to have to eat at the same table with him, and, to ease the situation, Quint took the biologist's meals to his compartment so that he could eat alone.

When the biologist saw that Quint meant to return to Dodai to rescue the physicist, he was viciously overjoyed.

"We can wipe out the planet, Quint!" His eyes blazed with delight.

"Wipe out? I don't think I understand the phrase."

"Destroy them; slaughter them; lay waste their land!"

"But why? What evil fills you with so much hatred that you reject all the ethics of our people? We don't destroy; we build!"

"It's the only kind of contact the Dodains would understand or respect." The biologist paced the floor, rubbing his hands. "And we could do it so easily; so very easily! Use one of our spare radial tubes; make a small change in the light converter; and aim the output vent at their cities. It would sweep them into dust, with the fire of a new sun."

Respecting the biologist's evident madness, Quint allowed him to rave as he pleased, making no comment. But when Quint was ready to return to Dodai, he took the precaution of lacing the biologist's food with a soothing sleep-hypnotic when he left his meal in his compartment.

Under cover of darkness, Quint dropped toward the planet in an emergency rocket escape raft. Tracer beams guided him into the park where the physicist was held.

He had miscalculated the protectiveness of the night hour, for scattered groups of Dodaians were strolling in the park. They fled in terror when they saw him, and the lights went out in the towering city buildings while sirens screamed in the streets.

Quint was amazed that they

recognized him so quickly, and that their fear was so great. His costume was different from theirs, of course, but otherwise they were rational people, just as he was. How could they be so certain, after only a cursory glance, that he was not one of themselves, simply masquerading in a peculiarly bizarre kind of dress?

In the pale moonlight he began to follow the throbbing of his tracer unit toward the physicist's prison. A black van careened past him, and seconds later a blaze of white floodlights centered upon a large, barred cage. Quint saw the physicist inside, clinging to the metal bars. Dodaians carrying their gleaming metal tubes were grouped in front of the prison; others, in similar uniforms, were gathering at the spot from all directions.

As Quint walked slowly toward them, they pointed their tubes at him. The terrifying explosions shook the quiet, night air. When Quint continued to stand unharmed, a cry of dismay passed over the Dodaians. One who seemed to be a leader shouted something at Quint, and sprang up by the cage, pointing his deadly tube at the physicist.

Quint understood the pantomime well enough. Since they could not stop him, they were threatening to slay the man he

had come to save. Quint stood still, trying to convey his purpose through gesture and the quiet gentleness of his voice.

Four Dodaians moved toward him, carrying a large, metal-linked net. They clearly meant to take him prisoner, too. He shook his head and tried to communicate with them again. The Dodaian leader merely screamed at him and prodded the physicist with the point of his metal tube.

The physicist called out a warning to Quint, but he did not understand it above the seething din of Dodaian voices. He began to back away. The four men carrying the net sprang at him. Quint's artificial negative field repulsed the metal, hurling the net back and bowling over the men.

This terrified them. Some of the uniformed Dodaians threw down their metal tubes and fled. The leader by the cage exhorted them, with no result. When he saw that Quint was moving toward him, he turned in desperation and fired his tube again and again into the body of the physicist.

Quint cried out as if the death agony had been his own.

At that moment white light blazed in the sky. The city rocked in flaming destruction. The earth shook so that Quint could not stand. A hurricane of searing

wind roared over the park, stripping the trees of leaves, ripping the loose gravel from the path. Quint reeled drunkenly in the falling, blazing debris, holding his hands over his bleeding face while the skin blistered and peeled away. In the nightmare darkness beyond the park the proud city towers were collapsing; above the concussion of shattering walls, Quint heard the occasional shrieks of trapped Dodaians.

Something fell heavily at his feet. It was a charred strip of wood, with familiar letters painted upon it. He picked it up and he was still holding it in his hand when the Rad-I settled clumsily into the park. The exit-way opened, and the biologist ran out to drag Quint toward the ship.

"I followed you with the ground-screen," the biologist shouted. "When I saw them kill the physicist, I had to use the radal weapon. It's the only language these people understand."

"But I—I gave you—" Quint couldn't speak above a whisper; after five words his voice failed altogether.

"The hypnotic? I thought you might, so I ate none of my food."

Quint's legs moved sluggishly. It was impossible for him to climb the incline into the ship. Controlling his loathing, the

biologist began to drag him up the exit-way. They were at the door when Dodaian airships attacked them. Quint's webbing protected him from the spattering metal, but the biologist screamed and collapsed.

Quint was able to help his companion into the lock and to push the lever that closed the exit-way.

"Get us off the ground," the biologist cried. "Then sterilize yourself—particularly your exposed skin—and cover your entire body with the plasmatic gelatin. I think you weren't out there long enough for the damage to be fatal."

Fighting burning pain and the grasping mists of unconsciousness, Quint climbed slowly into the control compartment. He turned the dials and the radal-cruiser shot up out of the ruined city. Breathing heavily, he stripped off his tattered uniform and washed his skin with the sterilizing fluid. It was like the distorted action of a dream. His head swam, and a slow weakness dragged heavily on his muscles.

But as soon as he applied the gelatin, the pain ebbed and his mind began to clear. He checked the position of the cruiser on the astroscreen and saw that the planet of Dodai was a small sphere, receding behind them.

He set a course for the Alliance, and went to help the biologist.

The biologist was lying motionless in a spreading pool of blood. Beneath him was the charred, lettered board that Quint had carried away from Dodai. Quint realized that the biologist's wounds were fatal, and he felt a bitter pang of remorse that he had not taken care of the biologist first, before looking after his own burns. Yet, if he had, he wouldn't have had the strength to pilot the Rad-I away from Dodai. In spite of the biologist's insane aversion to Quint, he had saved the cruiser and its records of the expedition by sacrificing himself.

Quint carried the biologist to his compartment and gave him drugs to ease the pain. After a time, the biologist opened his eyes; when the first wave of revulsion had passed over his face, he tried to smile. He spoke so softly his voice was almost inaudible.

"You must go home and tell them, Quint; tell them never to send another Expo-mission to Dodai."

"I understand; the people here are still too primitive for Alliance membership. In centuries to come—"

"No, Quint! It's the Prohibition! They will never be able—" The biologist began to cough,

and blood welled from his mouth. He seemed to gesture toward the Communicator lying beside his couch. Quint thought he understood, although the biologist shook his head weakly as Quint fixed the band to his forehead.

Quint adjusted the receptors and turned up the power. In the instant of the biologist's death, Quint dragged from his tortured mind the concepts he had tried to conceal. It was the thing the biologist had learned from the Dodaian.

Quint's first recognizable generalization was a satisfying sense of group superiority. He was himself a master of all men, and deservedly so. In that moment Quint recovered from the hypnotic that had been given him at birth. It was as if a curtain rolled back, and he saw himself for the first time—tall, handsome, beautifully proportioned, alert, intelligent, capable of greatness in all things. And he saw the people of the Alliance, too—the sniveling, weak, white-haired monster which had been the biologist; the blue-scaled horror which was the physicist; and all the countless nightmare variations on all the planets of the Alliance.

These were the people he had always known, as he had always seen them; but for the first time

he saw them in physical appearance, rather than in the personality patterns which he had learned to define as persons. They were all beasts—weird, inhuman, incapable sub-races. Only the scattered few who were like himself in biological structure continued to exist as persons. For Quint the inner spirit which held the Alliance together vanished, and he saw only the horror of the outer shell.

He tore the receptors from his head, but he could not tear the awareness out of his soul. He looked on the bleeding hulk of the biologist and was supremely glad that he had died in pain and alone.

By the whim of chance, Quint was twice insulated from the full impact of the Dodaian psychology—first, because the knowledge had been filtered through the mind of the biologist, as he struggled to conquer his acquired aversion; and, secondly, because the biologist had fought so hard to hold back the truth before he died.

Quint plunged to the edge of madness, but the rationality he had known all his life held him back. Slowly he began to understand the Other Time of his people. It was not a period of pre-history, but of erased-history. In that day Quint's people had been like the Dodaians, but

the diverse and warring groups had been welded together by artificially wiping out their hereditary group hatreds and distrusts. The hypnotics taught them to define men in terms of personality, rather than of physical appearance. Their reward had been interplanetary unity, at the small price of solidifying a part of their individual minds permanently on the level of childhood. For it was only the child who never saw significance in the differences of racial appearance.

The old pattern had been oddly sublimated into a subconscious drive by the people of the Alliance to discover a rational race different from themselves.

Slowly Quint recovered from the madness of Dodai—as much as he ever would. The important thing, he realized, was to save the Alliance from ever discovering the truth. To do that, the Expo-mission must fail completely; none of its records could be examined or recovered.

Quint brought the Rad-I in close to the central Alliance planet, and killed the power units. He mounted a rocket emergency raft and moved out in space, taking with him the converted radial tube which the biologist had used to destroy the Dodaian city. At a safe distance he turned the blaze of light

upon the cruiser, and watched it flame into nothingness. Then he took the tube apart and abandoned the pieces in space.

The only memento he saved, as a kind of ironic personal reminder of the truth he never dared share, was the charred board he had brought with him from the burning city.

He landed and made his report to the Council. The Exposition had reached Dodai, he said, and found an uninhabitable planet; on the return trip, the radial motor had failed; only Quint had escaped the catastrophe.

He went into the formal garden to await the decision of the Council. Quint had no doubt that they would remove his temporary rank of Delegate, as the price of failure; but he had no regret of that. As soon as he could, he would resign from the Interplanetary Assistance Corps and go back to his native planet, to live out his years farming his father's plantation. In such loneliness and desolation he would have no chance to reveal the truth, even in an unguarded moment.

"Quint! Quint, dear!" Parla came to sit beside him. She tried to kiss him, and he moved away, sweat breaking out on his face and hands. "Don't be dejected, Quint; I think they may give you

the merit promotion for bravery, even though you brought back no agreement. My father promised to speak in your favor."

His mind cried out in horror, and his voice caught in his throat; he looked away from her quickly, so that she would not see his face.

"What was it like, Quint—this dead planet of Dodai?"

Frantically he pulled from his coat the fragment of wood he had saved and showed it to her; he must concentrate on that—on anything—even the fabric of a new lie, to hold back the evil that was crawling inside his soul. "In one of their ruined cities, I picked this up," he said dully.

"Their letters are like ours, and the words—isn't it odd? If you say them quickly, it's what we call ourselves!"

A voice came over the amplifier summoning Quint to the Council chamber—for formal ceremony of commendation. He stood up and Parla faced him, her face radiant, her eyes brimming with tears of joy.

"They've voted you the promotion, Quint!" She threw her arms around him, and her lips were warm and liquid on his. "You're a Delegate, Quint. That means that we—you and I—oh, Quint, it's everything we dreamed of!"

She dropped the charred board, and, while they kissed, her feet rested upon it. Quint fought the horror in his mind, and tried to shut his eyes against it.

For Parla was a hideously purple-scaled monstrosity. Her arms, roughly gnarled, gleaming with the nauseous fluid exuded by her race, lay like something filthy on the clean, clear brown of his own skin. He had lost the vision of the person he loved, in looking upon the biological shell that housed it.

Parla touched the fragment of wood with her toe and read the letters aloud.

"NEW YORK P—. That must have been the name of

their city, Quint. The letters are exactly like ours, and if you slur the words they sound a little like our slang expression—you know, what we call our sophisticates, the nyawker. I wonder if there's any relationship between our people and the Dodaians?"

That was it, Quint thought desperately. Concentrate on the meaningless fluff of that enigma, bury all conscious thought in a problem that could never be solved; in time, perhaps, the horror would pass.

The voice on the amplifier summoned him again, and he walked reluctantly toward the Council hall, to receive the highest award his people could give him.

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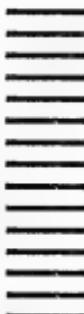
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